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ANNEX

Jenny Fowler

By

MARGARET WEYMOUTH JACKSON

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BY MARGARET WEYMOUTH JACKSON

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JENNY FOWLER

BOOK ONE

SUSAN

JENNY FOWLER

CHAPTER ONE

JENNY BECOMES ENGAGED

THE girls in the swing on the wide front porch at Caruthers' sat in silence, watching Molly Winnet go stalking by. She was really Molly Clarke, now, for she had been married a year to a traveling man not known to the people of Hilltown. But to Jenny Fowler and to Marian Caruthers, she would always be Molly Winnet, at once the scandal and sensation of her contemporaries, and the great anxiety of their elders. Jenny nudged Marian, to call her attention to Molly's elaborate indifference. Molly's coarse black hair, straight and shining and thick, was arranged in a pyramid of puffs upon her small head. She wore an orange and black striped blazer over a cerise dress that was short for that date, and her white stockings were of silk, her white pumps had marvelously high heels. Furthermore, she was rouged and powdered, and her long eyelashes were pointed with mascara. The use of cosmetics was to be perfectly correct in the course of years. But it was scandalous in the last year of the nineteenth century, and the young girls on Caruthers' porch were thrilled. They could see nothing forlorn about Molly, nothing pitiable in the fact that she walked always alone. The aspect of life she presented to their ignorant imaginations was at once fascinating and repulsive.

When Molly was well out of hearing, the chums spoke to each other, looking back through the vines on Caruthers' porch, to stare after her.

"Do you remember the time we wouldn't play croquet with the boys because she was there?" asked Marian softly. "I've always been ashamed of that, Jenny. It was horrid of us. What little prigs we were!"

"We'd probably do the same thing now," said Jenny. "I felt more ashamed of myself at the time than I have since. Molly is the limit! And we *were* little prigs. But I wouldn't play croquet with her now, would you?"

"I suppose not. No—of course I wouldn't! It's different. She wouldn't be asked to play now. But she couldn't have been so bad when we were all little, and that day, on Kents' lawn, with Dunny's new croquet set, it wouldn't have contaminated us. We stood off to one side and whispered. I can see us. We had new white sailor dresses, and we thought we were absolutely perfect with our red hair-ribbons and our white shoes and stockings. We told Dunny our mothers wouldn't let us play with Molly Winnet." Marian laughed. "What a story!"

"Yes, and Dunny said he couldn't chase her out of his yard. But Merle was the only one who had any sense. He said, 'Aw, come on. She won't bite you. She can play swell croquet!' But we were stubborn."

"The worst thing we did was to coax the boys away. I'm surprised that Dunny came with us. He was so terribly honorable about everything. But he didn't like Molly. We kept edging farther down the lawn, and then we all ran. We went down-town and had sodas at Miller's. And you couldn't swallow yours because of what we had done to Molly. What a funny girl you were, Jenny! Always doing things, and then being sorry for them."

Jenny laughed ruefully, and pushed the swing with her narrow foot.

"Merle was always the kindest-hearted boy in this town," Marian said, "and he's certainly grown up to be the best of all."

Jenny remained silent. The last of the long summer day was fading. The girls, in their best dresses, fine cotton stockings on slender ankles, black strap slippers on their feet, were waiting for escorts.

"Do you think I put on too much of that narcissus perfume, Marian?"

"It's lovely. You look wonderfully nice, Jenny. Isn't it simply marvelous that we have this summer, with the boys here, and dances every week? Our crowd will soon be broken up. Do you think we'll ever change toward each other, Jenny?"

"Things needn't change," said Jenny firmly.

Marian nodded. Her hand lay inside of Jenny's arm, and she pressed her fingers down in a caress.

"We'll always be best friends, won't we, Jenny? It almost spoils college for me, that you can't go. We've been in school together for twelve years, and neither one of us ever had any other chum. Couldn't you manage to go? Couldn't you get a job to help pay your way? You're clever, Jenny. I can't give it up—I want you to go, too."

For a moment Jenny's dark face flamed, and then the color died away. She shook her head.

"I don't want to go to college to work," she said. "After all, my mother was a Theta—and I ought to be one, too. What I want at college isn't an education, terrible as that sounds. I'm like all the rest of you. I want to go for the fun of it, to live in a house with other girls, and go to dances and football games and have a good time." She caught her slender hands to-

gether. There was suppressed eagerness in her voice, longing, old and unsatisfied. "It's what I want more than anything else—a good time! Pretty clothes, dances, beaux,—fun! It wouldn't be worth it, to me, grubbing away in an office, just to get to go to classes, and skimping along on old clothes and makeshift arrangements. I'd rather work at the bank, and have some pretty things, if I do stay at home."

"Well, you're honest enough about it," said Marian. "I can't think where the summer's gone. It's too bad Merle can't go back to college this year."

"It would certainly have been wonderful for you, with Merle at the university. But then, he's had two years. His father can't send him back again. Mother thinks he'll be better off at work now, since he doesn't intend to study for a profession. Dunny has every chance, but Merle's the smartest."

"Here they come," said Marian.

The two boys who advanced down the wooden sidewalk were very different in appearance, but their friendship, like that between Jenny and Marian, was a matter of years' standing. The foursome was inevitable. Jenny and Marian had gone through Hilltown schools with their arms about each other. Their mothers had been friends before them, and though Marian's mother had married far more successfully than Jenny's, she had never forgotten her childhood intimate, nor lost touch with her, and she had befriended and sheltered Susan's daughter with her own. The saddest times the girls had known had been when quarrels parted them for a few days, their happiest hours on "making up." In the same way Durham Kent III, the only child of the town's most prosperous and aristocratic family, and Merle Ferguson,

a Methodist preacher's son, had been friends and equals always. They had separated after high school, Dunny, as his friends called him, going east to college, as his father had done before him, and Merle going for two struggling years to the state university near by. For the last two years Merle and Marian had been having a boy and girl love-affair, and Jenny and Dunny tagged along with them. They were all so intimate, so accustomed to one another, that they were scarcely able to appreciate the value of their affection. The girls expected no especial gallantry from the young men. But they were treated with a solid respect, the kind of attitude "good" girls received in 1900.

The boys came up on Caruthers' porch, and Dunny said:

"We went by for you, Jenny, but your mother said you'd been over here for an hour."

Jenny put out her left hand to him, and he took it and sat down on the swing beside her. Merle and Marian were talking together. Jenny and Marian both watched Merle as he spoke.

Dunny was not a big youth. He was medium in height, spare, a little dry already, aristocratic in his looks and bearing. His fine dark brown hair was thick and crisp, his skin was brown, and his eyes, too, were brown and clear. He was slender-boned, upright, like a fine blade, yet a boy who would mature slowly, would seem, for a while, slow at life, and quick only at books. He had a manner of speech and action superior to other Hilltown boys. It seemed almost as if he had been reared in a different environment. He was reserved, correct, courteous in all his ways, a young man not to be appreciated by an inexperienced girl. To an older

woman he might have had a strong romantic appeal. But he was not interested in older women. He was interested only in Jenny. Within a few years he would be a partner in his father's established law firm, would have, as his own, the big Kent house, and the small but sound fortune that went with it, as well as the wide lawns, the beautiful flower-beds and gardens.

Merle Ferguson had no such antecedents nor expectations. His father was a fiery fighting man, with fierce indignant eyes and a mobile orator's mouth. He had had the call to preach in his youth, and he had done it with great fervor. Hell and damnation were his favorite topics for sermon and prayer. He believed in the conviction of sin, the resurrection of the dead, the redemption of the soul. Merle's mother was a country-reared woman, severe and plain. The boy himself had been born late in their lives, and they considered him a direct answer to prayer. The Reverend Mr. Ferguson was now retired, a call preacher, who lived in a small place on the edge of town, did some gardening and chicken raising, was a contributing editor to his denominational papers, and a great preacher for revivals. He made a slender living, but he and his wife were well accustomed to making small sums go far in maintaining respectability.

Merle was like his father, but without religious impulse. His eyes were blue, eager and intense. He had his father's brown wavy hair, his father's robust health and vehement temperament. He was big, strong, ardent and vital, and very gay, quick to laugh and tease, awkward and self-conscious in serious moments.

"Molly went by," said Marian, "and she pretended not to see us. Jenny and I were just talking about the

day we all ran away from her. We're ashamed of it now."

"You're not," said Merle promptly. "You're all pleased to recall it. You smile when you say it. Shame on you, Marian! Molly's what the town made her. She might have been different, if she had had a chance."

"She'd never have been different," said Dunny. "And as for that croquet game, I'm the one to be ashamed. It was my house. I was punished for it, too. The last whipping I ever had."

"Yes, and now you'd get one if you didn't run away from her," said Jenny, and they all laughed.

Dunny brushed his fingers across Jenny's cheek.

"Probably I would," he admitted. "Well, are we going to the dance, or aren't we?"

"It's early. Why hurry?"

They were all silent, still thinking of Molly Winnet, whose life was so different from their own. There was a certain impropriety which was daring and exciting in discussing her in mixed company. She was some one you pretended not to see on the street for the blackest, the most mysterious reasons, although Merle always spoke to her. He had even befriended her on occasion, Jenny knew, and she knew that he was probably the only young man in town who would dare to do so with impunity.

"What I can't understand is her husband," said Merle thoughtfully.

But Dunny, who ruled them all more than he or they knew, had decided that the conversation was unsuitable, and he said dryly, "After all, it's none of our affair, is it?"

Jenny smiled at him unexpectedly. Her rare slow

smiles were to be coveted. She rose now in one movement and stood before him, a tall girl, extremely thin. She wore a rose-colored sash tight about the waist of her mull dress, and it seemed almost incredible that a grown girl should be so slender. Her small firm breasts were high and sweet, her limbs over-long and a little awkward. Her face was broad, with long dark eyes, a soft childish nose and a wide beautiful mouth. Her throat seemed too slight to bear the weight of her face and her heavy, soft dark hair. All of her beauty was half promise still, but her voice was charming, deep and husky, rich with a warm vitality, and sometimes when she spoke it was uncertain, like a child's. Durham Kent watched her, with a contentment and pleasure, an impersonal delight, more suitable to maturity than to youth.

Marian was very different. She was girlish, fair, with brown hair and bright, pretty blue eyes. Her skin was of roses and cream, while Jenny's was pale, almost sallow. Marian was well proportioned; small-boned, plump and pretty. She was considered the prettiest girl in Hilltown. No one thought of Jenny as pretty. But a stranger who had never seen either of them before would have found his whole attention fixed on the tall, thin, dark girl, with her wistful eyes and wayward wilful mouth, and her appealing, beautiful voice.

Jenny had a deeper charm, perhaps, because she had had a harder life, and there was more temperament, more feeling in her. She had had to maneuver and shift, to make adjustments, whereas all things were poured into Marian's lap. Jenny was not sure of herself. She felt an apprehension of failure, always. She struggled

against the handicap of a background of which she was ashamed. Marian had that quality of self-confidence which is so attractive to youth. She had egotism. It was not objectionable, for she was young and pretty and affectionate. But she still felt as she had at eleven, in her new white sailor dress, that she was just as she wanted to be!

Merle felt this, evidently, and was held by it more than any virtue or intelligence could have held him. He followed Marian in and out. He danced with her, sought her, tried to make love to her at every opportunity. He took her completely at her own estimation of herself, and seemed insensible of Jenny's bright dark eyes following him.

They walked along the street in twos, talking back and forth to one another; the boys, in white flannels and dark coats, the girls in their thin dresses and shining coiffures, their young noses coated with powder, their lips innocently red. They met and spoke to fellow townspeople. A few leaves already lay on the grass, though August lingered and the night was warm. The sky gradually grew dark, and stars appeared faintly in the blue. It was not far to go to the Armory, but it took them half an hour to walk it, talking to one another, standing and moving on slowly.

"I'm going Saturday," Dunny said, and they all stopped to stare at him.

"I thought you weren't going until next month."

"I want to get settled before classes begin. I'm going to take a few weeks, go to New York and do some things I wanted to do last year and didn't manage. I've friends I want to visit before we are actually bound to classes."

"I can't bear for you to go," said Jenny unexpectedly. "It's been so hard every fall with you and Merle going. But this year Marian goes, too! I'll be left completely!"

"I'll be here, Jenny," said Merle kindly. "I'll see you."

"That's so, Merle. But you aren't good to me, as Dunny is."

They laughed a little, looking at one another. Jenny's eyes unexpectedly filled with tears, and Marian hugged her.

"Don't cry, Jenny. I haven't gone yet. Why, I'll be here almost two weeks. And you're coming over to visit me, as soon as I am settled. We'll have some gay times. Merle will get us bids to dances, won't you, Merle?"

"Of course I will. I'll probably be over there visiting."

They moved on again. Dunny and Jenny lagged a little. He put his hand within her arm.

"Do you really care that much—about my going, Jenny?"

"Of course," she said impatiently. "I hate to be left behind so much. I get blue at times, and at other times I am furious. Why should I have to stay here, always?" She paused, and visibly strengthened her pride. "Not that I care so much," she added disdainfully. "I like my job. I really do. Mr. Bowen is wonderful to me. I'll probably learn more, here with him, than I would at school. Lots of things about college are silly—for—for girls, anyhow. Oh, not the way you go—to a wonderful place—to prepare for a profession. But all that Merle and Marian want is a frat pin—and fun——"

"I miss you when I'm gone," said Dunny, who seemed to understand bravado. "I wrote to you, last year,

every time I wrote to Mother. I've an idea. Jenny. I want to talk to you about it."

"What is it, Dunny?"

"I've already talked to Mother. She thinks it's too soon. But since I saw your eyes filled with tears—well, I'll tell you, later on."

"I can't imagine, Dunny, what you mean."

"Can't you?" he teased.

There were lights and music streaming from the wide doors of the Armory when they arrived. It was the last Masonic dance of the summer. Girls in party dresses, men in white flannels or business suits, old ladies in long-sleeved, dark silk dresses, moved about the doorway and ascended the stairs. Merle and Dunny handed in the cards they had purchased and received program favors. The young people danced with their own crowd exclusively. It was the era of trading dances. There were never many extras or stags in Hilltown.

Marian was the most popular girl on the floor. She danced beautifully, and she was happy and brimming with laughter. But Jenny had attention of her own. Older men, as well as her contemporaries, sought her. Probably it didn't occur to any one else at the dance, that her dress was of her own making, her shoes inexpensive, with paper soles, her sash the same she had worn on three dresses. But Jenny knew it, and felt that Marian's fine crêpe de Chine, hand-made lingerie, her expensive, fine narrow slippers, her necklace and bracelet of brilliants, proved her superiority.

And now, thought Jenny, Marian was to have Merle too. It wasn't enough that she had beauty, a lovely home, a devoted mother and father, gorgeous clothes, a chance to go to college and belong to a sorority, but

she must have Merle! Jenny, dancing in the curve of Dunny's arm, wondered why she cared. Dunny was far nicer than Merle. He was a better match. And he was a superior person; steadier, gentler. His wife would have everything heart could wish—everything, that is, save Merle. Jenny feared the tumult in her own heart. She loved Marian devotedly. She thought, as Merle did, that Marian's valuation of herself was correct. She didn't want to care for the same man that Marian loved. But the very sight of Marian and Merle together set up in her heart an agitation. It made her want to be irritable with Dunny. It tempted her to quarrel with Marian, to strike out and alienate her friend.

She had had to watch herself, all this long summer, in order that, when they were all together, she did not reveal her interest in Merle by waiting on him, sitting down beside him, following him instinctively. She had always loved him, it seemed to her. When they were little, he had liked Jenny better than any other girl in Hilltown. He had been her first "boy," when they were all innocent of other values besides the impulses of affection. But that was changed since he had gone to college. It was not, in any way, a change due to snobbishness, but rather just the effect on him of seeing what sort of girl it was that other fellows were proud to know. And the limitations of his own situation made Marian's atmosphere of perfection more estimable.

The young people danced for several hours without leaving the floor. Mr. Caruthers finally called a square dance, and all the youngsters promptly departed. They went piling down the stairs in a crowd, not to be drawn into the antiquities of a quadrille or reel.

"Let's walk," said Dunny, and Jenny called back:

"Come on, Marian—let's walk!"

But Marian and Merle had disappeared. Jenny and Dunny walked along slowly. The girl felt full of sadness and wistfulness, and overwhelmed with the old sense of failure which had visited her so often. Dunny put his arm around her when they got into the shade of the trees, and Jenny wished he were not always so gentle and kind. Perhaps, if he would shake her, scold her . . .

"This is what I wanted to talk to you about, Jenny," he said. They stopped under the great trees by Bonniewells'. They walked across the lawn and sat down on the edge of the fountain, where a little water played murmuringly. The big house was dark. The night was soft and kind about them. Mrs. Bonniewell's little curly dog came and muzzled her nose in Jenny's hand, and trotted away again. Dunny turned Jenny's face to his and kissed her. She trembled a little, at the sheer, impersonal, youthful emotion of kissing.

"Dunny," she whispered, "you mustn't—set your heart on me. I don't love you, Dunny—only just as my very best friend. But you mustn't care for me——"

"But I love you," he told her. "I'll never love any one else. You're prettier than any girl I know. Jenny, I want to take care of you—make you happy. Mother says you're the only one of all the young girls here who'll really be distinguished, as a woman. And I agree with her. I think you're wonderful, now. It's a long time to wait—three years. But if we're engaged, we won't mind it."

"I don't believe I want to be engaged to any one, yet, Dunny. I'm only nineteen."

"But I'm almost twenty-three. I'll be twenty-five when I come home to practise. I've had my two years' pre-law. You'll be twenty-one or two, then. Oh, Jenny, you're so sweet—so sweet!"

"Let me think about it," she whispered. "Let me talk to my mother." Oh, why couldn't it have been Merle? But Dunny was dear. He was the best boy in the world, honorable and true. He was far too nice to be treated as she was treating him.

He put his fingers on her cheek and drew her face close to his own. Timidly he kissed the thin childish throat, and the kiss startled her away from him. But his embrace did not antagonize her. There was something in Dunny that made it impossible for him to be offensive. At any moment it seemed that Jenny might turn, might respond to him. It seemed almost a matter of her will. But she did not, though she wished she could. She was acquiescent in his arms, that was all.

"I'll get you a ring," he whispered, lifting her hand and pressing it to his face, "a beautiful diamond. And I'll write to you every day. And when I graduate, you can come east to visit me, and we'll be married, and go away on a trip—perhaps to Europe, Jenny."

"Dunny, let's wait another year—and see how we feel. We'll still have a long engagement."

"We're grown up, Jenny. We know, now."

"Let's go back and dance. We can talk another time."

"Won't you kiss me once, Jenny?"

She pressed her lips to his, but he was not satisfied.

"Wake up," he whispered, and held her close to himself. "Don't be such a baby. I'd never harm you, Jenny. You needn't be afraid of me. I love you. Don't you know what that means?"

She rose, with a little distressed sound. "I'm not a baby," she said.

She almost told him about the time when she was a

sophomore in high school, just fifteen years old. When she and Merle had stood under the tree in her mother's yard and kissed—how their lips had touched without volition, and clung, in ecstasy. That kiss stood between her and Dunny now. She could never kiss any one else, like that.

"I'll tell you to-morrow. I'll talk to my mother——"

He could only walk beside her. Ahead of them, in the light by the Armory door, Jenny could see Merle and Marian, turning to go in. They stopped and looked at each other. Jenny's quick eyes saw something that had not been there before. On the waist of Marian's dress an object flashed and sparkled in the light from the door, and then became a small jeweled crest, bright and dark. It was Merle's fraternity pin.

"I'll marry you, Dunny," said Jenny, without thinking, turning to him blindly, seeking to protect herself. "I'll marry you whenever you want me—to-night—to-morrow——"

He drew her back into the shadow. He took her in his arms reverently, tenderly.

"It's a promise, Jenny?"

"I promise you. I'll marry you."

"Jenny, I love you. Won't you say it—for me?"

Her lips were stiff.

"Some day. It's hard for me to say, Dunny."

He kissed her a long moment. She trembled a little in his arms.

"You're cold, darling. The dew is falling. We'll go back. Or shall we go home? Shall we go to your house and talk a little while? Who wants to dance?"

"I do. We'd better go back, or some one will say something. We can tell Marian and Merle," she said,

and then suddenly: "Oh, Dunny, hold me tight and love me! I need a lot of love, Dunny!"

"Don't cry, sweetheart. I know. I feel like crying too. I've never been so happy in my life. Your face is wet. Here—let me wipe your tears away. Oh, Jenny—you're so sweet—so sweet!"

CHAPTER TWO

SUSAN APPROVES

THE news of the two engagements was pleasing to every one who knew the young people. Dunny and Jenny, coming back to the Armory, met Mr. Caruthers on the stairs, and told him. He shook hands with both of them.

"You boys and girls are growing up too fast for any use," he complained affectionately, his hand on Jenny's shoulder. "I suppose Marian will be the next one. You know, Jenny, that when the time comes I'll do as much for you as I'll do for her. You're like our own daughter to Mama and me."

Jenny smiled up at him. Mr. Caruthers had always been good to her. She veered away swiftly from the thought of her own father.

"You're just made for each other," went on Mr. Caruthers complacently. "But I thought you were too slow to catch a bright girl like Jenny, Durham."

They all laughed and went on up-stairs. Dunny's face was shining, and he refused to allow any one to cut in on the dance. Near the door of the ladies' dressing-room, they found Merle waiting for Marian. They stopped. Dunny's arm fell on Merle's shoulder. Jenny looked away. Her face was white.

"Merle, congratulate us. We're engaged, Jenny and I."

"Well, you old sneaks!" Merle seized Dunny's hand and shook it. "It must be contagious. I gave Marian my pin to-night. She's going to wear it to college, to warn the boys that she's already taken!"

"You've been engaged, and never told us?" demanded Jenny, and she hummed a little, carelessly, after she said it, and moved her feet with the music.

"Not exactly engaged," admitted Merle. "But of course, we both knew. But I just gave her my pin. I think what we said, about being separated, made us realize——"

"Yes," said Dunny. "But I'll be away off east—until Christmas, and you can see Marian frequently."

Marian came through the door and joined them, with the jeweled pin trembling on her breast. She had tidied her hair and powdered her nose. Her cheeks were crimson, her eyes like stars.

Merle said at once, "What do you think—Jenny and Dunny have signed up, too?"

"Honestly, Jenny?"

Jenny nodded. Marian wound her arm around Jenny's neck, and laughed with happiness.

"Well, we're all in the same boat now," she said, and added, "But we'll be married first. Merle's going to work hard and save all winter, and I'm only going to college one year."

"You'll be married next summer?" asked Dunny.

"As soon as Marian can get ready, after she comes home from college," Merle told them.

The music had begun again, and Dunny took Jenny away from Marian, and they began to dance. She had been silent while the others were talking. Now she said unexpectedly:

"I want to go home, Dunny."

Without a word he took her from the dance-floor and they left. They walked home through the quiet deserted street, arms linked together. At least, thought Jenny,

fiercely, they couldn't any of them think she had taken second choice! She had saved her pride. Suddenly, bitterly, she resented Marian's security, Marian's soft plump hands into which every good gift and every perfect gift was laid.

Dunny wanted to come in, when they reached her house. The porch of the Fowler place was old and narrow, with a great honeysuckle vine growing up one end of it. There was neither swing nor rockers, but a bench stood in the deep shadow. The tall narrow windows of the house were dark, save where a light glowed in one up-stairs room. Jenny said:

"I think I want to go in, Dunny. I want to talk to Mother a while. It's all so new——"

"Whatever you wish," he answered, and added, "I want it to be that way always, Jenny—what you wish. I'll never go against you. I want to take care of you, to make you happy. I'll go to the city in the morning, and bring home your ring."

They kissed each other. He was either very restrained, or singularly free from passion. His kiss was tender and good. Jenny felt that she could have broken into wild weeping in his arms. She felt that if she told him about Merle, he would understand. He would not change or reproach her. He was the best man in all the world. A far better man than Merle. But she loved Merle. It was because she was not good enough for Dunny that she loved Merle.

"Good night, Dunny. I'll see you to-morrow."

She hooked the screen and bolted the door of the house. She and her mother lived alone. Jenny sometimes wondered if this were not the first house that had ever been built in the valley. It was so narrow, with

long narrow rooms and high ceilings, a house built by a man used to the crowded streets of old Philadelphia, who, with all the open country around him for the asking, had built his straight-front, narrow house, with the small porch near the street. It was years since anything at all had been done to improve the property. Jenny kept the grass cut in the yard, and it was pleasant. The house, and everything in it, was old and dark and forlorn with neglect. Once Jenny had striven to make a nice room for herself, to brighten her windows with cretonne, to re-cover an old horsehair sofa. But her efforts had met with no encouragement and had died of inanition.

Jenny went up the narrow dark stairs with the old oilcloth coming off in strips. On the landing two doors opened into two bedrooms. A light shone from the door of her mother's room. Jenny paused on the stairs and looked in. Her mother, as usual, lay propped up in bed, reading by the light of a green-shaded student lamp which stood on a square marble-topped table beside her bed. Susan Fowler wore a thin shawl over the shoulders of her night-dress. The table beside her was littered, and on her knees, drawn up before her like a girl's, lay an open book, the pages held in place by her large, splendid hands. She put a marker in the place and yawned a little.

"Jenny? Did you have a nice time?"

Jenny came to the door and stood there. It seemed to her that she had never seen her mother before. She was sharply conscious of the untidy room, with books spilling from the dresser to the floor, the worn grass carpet with its uncovered holes, the great, ancient, dark walnut bed like a boat in some sea of paper, with her mother a-drift and a-dream upon it.

Susan Fowler's eyes were as dark and youthful in their unhappiness as Jenny's. Her thick black hair was streaked with gray. It was combed carelessly back from her face and fell in a loose braid over her shoulder. Her broad face was unlined, yet it was not fresh and pretty, rather grimy and ill-kempt. But neither neglect nor time would ever eradicate from Susan Fowler's face a distinction that had nothing to do with her appearance. Jenny knew that her mother could go into a roomful of exquisite, beautifully dressed women and, in old shoes and an old, even an untidy dress, be the most notable woman present. It was intelligence that shone from her, but an intelligence corrupt, degenerate with waste. She had long been an addict of the habit of reading. She read, and remembered everything, but put her knowledge to no use whatever. There had been a time when anything might have been possible to her, the stage, or a career as an artist or writer, or even as an educator. But a great calamity had turned aside and frustrated her very real ability, so that now she lived a life absolutely charmed, in a routine reduced to a minimum, in a house untidy and dark, reading the hours and days and weeks and years away, often reading all through the night, and sleeping a little toward morning, eating her meals with a book propped against the sugar bowl, careless of what it was she ate, indifferent to every physical comfort, so long as she prevented herself from thinking and remembering.

Sometimes the great men of the town, old Mr. Kent, for one, or the preachers, or Mr. Johnson, the editor of the local daily, or Mr. Welch or Mr. Bowen, came to see her, to talk to her about their problems. She understood everything, talked brilliantly, and she had intuition for

everything save her own affairs. She could talk without losing charm, for hours on end. But she made no effort to find any one to listen. She was considered a total, a supreme, failure by all the other women of the town.

Jenny wondered how to tell her news. She said, leaning in the door:

"I've got engaged to be married, Mother."

Mrs. Fowler's brilliant eyes narrowed a little. A slight look of pain crossed her face. Jenny knew how her mother hated change.

"You're going to be married, Jenny? And leave me?"

"You want me to stay with you, Mother?" The young voice was almost hopeful.

Mrs. Fowler smiled with deep charm.

"No, darling. I don't want you to stay with me. Would you, though, if I asked it?"

"Of course I would, Mother." How charming her mother could be, when she was interested—the most marvelous companion. "But now that you've said I needn't, I really can't tell. Can I?"

"Who is it, Jenny? Merle?"

"No, Mother. It's Dunny."

"I'm surprised that you have such good sense. Dunny be it, then. He is the best of them all. I'm glad, dear. Come and kiss me."

Jenny kissed her and sat down on the side of the bed. Mrs. Fowler moved her book a little. She was careful not to lose her place, and the sight of her care dampened Jenny's thrill of affection and happiness. But Mrs. Fowler wasn't aware of it.

"When are you going to be married, Jenny? Not soon!"

"Not for three years. Dunny starts his law work this

year. He will graduate two years from June. We'll be married then."

"I'm not much in favor of long engagements, Jenny."

"He'll be away, so it won't be so bad. And I may as well have the fun of being engaged, these years. There won't be anything to do here but wait, in any case."

"You mind so much Marian's going to college?"

"Of course not. She's only going for fun."

"I went to study. There weren't many girls in my class, Jenny. We worked hard. We were proud, because the boys didn't think much of us. But I did better work than any of them. However, that doesn't matter. What matters is that you're going to find out about Marian some day, and be hurt."

"What do you mean, Mother? Marian's my best friend."

"Oh, she's not deceitful. I think she loves you. But she's ordinary. She's like her father."

"And I am like mine?"

Mrs. Fowler's face was masked. She looked away. She lifted her book.

"Mother, tell me about Father."

"You know all there is to tell."

"And he must stay there in prison the rest of his life? Isn't it terrible? Doesn't it almost kill you, Mother, to think of him there?"

"We're not to talk of it. You must obey me in this, Jenny."

"But, Mother, I've got to talk of it to-night. Suppose he came home, Mother? Suppose they pardoned him? Why don't you ever write to him, or receive letters from him? Surely they wouldn't deny him that privilege? It's been nearly twenty years—it seems so strange

to me, Mother, to think I've a father, living there in prison, and he's never seen me, nor I him. I think of it, Mother. It—it wounds me."

"Do you need to think of it? Can you not think of him as I do—as dead?"

"Oh, Mother, you don't think of him so. You know you don't. Is that why you never write to him, Mother? Because you don't want to keep his memory alive—Mother?"

Mrs. Fowler opened her book definitely upon her knee. She spread the pages flat with her hand. She spoke in a casual remote tone:

"You really will not appreciate Plutarch until you are older, Jenny. The story of Camillus is not a story youth can understand. Four times dictator of Rome, thrice expelled by ungrateful citizens, he was called back in his old age, to save the city again—when he was eighty! Rome, the great city of antiquity! Athens was only a village beside her. Burned and pillaged, destroyed and held captive, yet always rising fresh and new, improved and beautified——"

Jenny rose with a heavy heart. She stooped and kissed her mother's cheek, then went to her own room, her shoulders slumped a little. She undressed and prepared for bed, took from her dresser drawer an old purse, and from it her few treasures. One of these was a picture of her mother as a baby, the most beautiful baby, Jenny thought. Another was her own first picture—a big-eyed, mournful little girl, with tightly curled hair hanging primly about her round face. And the third was the picture of a young man in a high-buttoned waistcoat, a winged collar and bow tie, a lock of hair falling on his forehead, and a long curled

mustache curved about his mouth. The eyes, looking full into Jenny's own, were piercing and true. The nose was large and strong, the lips a little heavy, but the face on the whole civilized and bold.

It was her father, Ian Fowler. In the first year of his married life, he had killed a man in a drunken fight, and had been sentenced to prison for life. Jenny had written him two or three letters when she was a little girl of ten, and first knew her father wasn't dead. She had written to him painfully, her small heart broken over the thought of him, but he had never answered. She wondered now if her letters had ever been mailed to him. She kissed his picture. She pressed her fresh and beautiful young mouth against the bit of pasteboard with an ardor Dunny had missed.

"Daddy—Daddy," she whispered, and then, defiantly, "No one considers crimes of passion as they do other crimes, like stealing or defrauding. If it happened now, they'd let him off! They'd call it manslaughter or self-defense."

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She lay down but could not rest. The light from her mother's room shone across her own open door. She felt that she ought to write to her father and tell him about her engagement. She had an instinct to surround it with every possible support, to make it binding, real, unbreakable. She rose and went to her mother's door again. But she did not speak. Susan Fowler lay with Plutarch forgotten on her knees, her head back against the pillow, her eyes closed, while great tears slipped down her cheeks and fell unheeded on her hands.

Dunny brought Jenny her ring the next evening. It was a very beautiful diamond solitaire in a gold Tiffany

setting. Jenny began to feel a little happier about things. She and Dunny sat on the front porch that night, on the top step, and he talked softly and eagerly about the future. He had been in to speak to Mrs. Fowler. Jenny and her mother were invited to dine at the Kents' the next day, which was Sunday. The engagement was sanctioned, official.

Jenny had not asked him to eat supper with her and her mother as Marian had asked Merle. That was different. Marian's mother would cook and clean all day for Marian's sweetheart. But Jenny told herself that she was fortunate, that she would be happy. There was no man in the world she admired and respected more than Dunny unless it was her employer, Mr. Bowen. Every one knew how honorable Dunny was, how courteous and good. He was hers, now, and she could appreciate him. When she was married, she would not be like her mother, reading and doing nothing else, nor like Marian, frivolous and gay. She would work hard, as she did at her job at the bank. She would keep her house spotless, and learn to cook well. She wouldn't want a maid to wait on them, but she would wait on Dunny herself. He would be proud of her. He would say, "How wonderfully well you do things, darling." And she would be happy. She would forget the strong vitality and magnetism that were Merle's.

But in contrast to her reasoned and measured content was Marian's shining foolish bliss, Marian's lilting voice and crimson cheeks and starlike eyes. Marian was in love, and loved. She was ecstatic, walking on the clouds. Jenny steeled herself to listen to Marian's rhapsodies, and smiled mysteriously when Marian reproached her for her lack of confidences.

Within two weeks Dunny and Marian were gone. Dunny had postponed his early departure, after he and Jenny became engaged. The first frost fell, the leaves came down from the great trees in showers of gold, and Jenny and Merle were left behind in the town, with the long winter before them.

CHAPTER THREE

A LONG WINTER

JENNY had two jobs that winter. She worked as a clerk in the bank every day, and from seven until eight-thirty, selling tickets at the Opera-House, whenever there was a show or lecture there. She was quick and accurate with money. The evening job, though intermittent, brought her in a little extra pay, which she felt she needed now that she was to be married. And it made the days pass more quickly.

She began to make definite plans, to save every cent that she could spare from her own and her mother's living expenses. Perhaps, she thought, thrilled with the sense of her rights, her privileges, Dunny would get her a cedar chest for Christmas, if she told him she wanted one. The idea would please him. And gradually she would gather together possessions against her wedding. She would make fine, hand-embroidered linen underwear and nightgowns. She would not go to the rich Kents without some treasures of her own! And her mother, she resolved, would be beautifully dressed, to the last detail, for her wedding.

Twice that fall Jenny and her mother dined at the Kents'. Mrs. Kent was gracious to them. It was not soon to be forgotten, in Hilltown, that Susan Fowler had been a Neade, that she came from one of the county's oldest and most cultured families, that one of her ancestors had been the first judge appointed for the Territory before it became a state; that Neades had been officers in the Continental Army, before the family moved westward, officers in the Union Army, in the Civil

War, pioneers, state builders, professional and learned men, when learning was a luxury. Nor could her own contemporaries forget that Susan herself had been the most brilliant, the most beautiful and promising of all the local young women of her own generation. The splendor of her youth still trailed, comet-like, across their memories. People do not gain or lose caste easily in Hilltown. And the crime which had reduced the Fowlers was not Jenny's or her mother's.

It was remembered as mitigating that Ian Fowler was an outlander. He had come from the Southeast, had fallen madly in love with Susan and married her out of hand. He opened a store in Hilltown, and prospered. He was a big powerful man, a born merchant and trader. But after a few months of marriage the great and secret curse of his life came to light. He was a drunkard. Jenny could not know, but others remembered the humiliations heaped upon Susan Fowler before the last final catastrophe of her brief marriage. The inevitable disaster came—the death of Watts Turnbull, a man of no account, a tipster, a loafer. Added irony to have one's whole life ruined because of him! Only a few weeks after his death Ian Fowler was sent away to a permanent sobriety.

Susan had the house in which she had been reared, a little money, and a farm her father had left her, from which she derived some rent. Now and then, in the early years, she worked in the library. She had been offered a school, but hadn't taken it. The effort had seemed to be too much for her.

The fact that Jenny's father was in the penitentiary mattered little to the old families of Hilltown; far less than it mattered to the girl herself. People were im-

patient with Susan Fowler that she let herself and her house go, that she managed her affairs so ill, that she did not protect her daughter sufficiently, rather than that she had had such a great misfortune. Still, she had her place which nothing could take from her.

Jenny sat at the great mahogany table at the Kents', with the crystal and sterling, the old blue plates before her, and looked about her with a sense of unreality. She could not at all picture herself here, among all the lovely things, these wide rooms and high ceilings, these shining windows and deep rugs. The gap was too far. She felt no anticipation, no reality. Perhaps she and Dunny could have a little place somewhere. She could imagine that. She sat in her tight blue dress (it had been her graduation dress) and listened to the familiar talk between her elders. Her mother's charming manners, deep vibrant voice, her mother's beautiful hands, and strong sense of equality with the Kents, were as unreal to Jenny as her own future here. Jenny did not feel any equality with the Kents. They belonged, she and her mother, in the dingy house on Tenth Street with the little bench and the great vine over the shabby porch. Dunny was real, yes. And his love for her she could understand and believe. But all the rest . . .

Not only at the Kents', but elsewhere Jenny found that people were glad of her engagement, satisfied to see the family position restored. Jenny was all Neade, they told her. She would be in a place the town believed to be hers by right of birth. Neighbors wished the girl well. She was coming out of the obscurity that had hitherto been lighted mainly by Marian's loyalty.

Sometimes she met Merle in the post-office and her heart stopped a beat and then went racing. When she

took Dunny's letter from her box and he took Marian's from his, they smiled at each other significantly. Jenny thought of Merle as always smiling. He was always happy, care-free. Perhaps this joyousness of his drew her more than any other quality. He was like some shining page in a gay court of ancient times. He wore an invisible plume in his hat. He was the antithesis of her own melancholy surroundings.

"How's the engaged girl?" Merle would whisper, teasing. "How's Dunny? He never writes to *me*!"

"Do you write to him?"

Merle would laugh and link his arm in Jenny's.

"I'm going to," he'd promise, as they went out. "Lord, Jenny, did you ever see such a long winter? I'm going to buzz you some night. We'll have to get together and kill some of all this time that's around. How you blush! You should have become engaged sooner. It's very becoming to you!"

And at her confusion, he laughed again. She exaggerated the fluster instinctively. She saw that he liked to think that she could not answer him quickly enough.

"Marian's pledged Kappa," he told her, and Jenny said:

"Theta's best."

"Go on! You're prejudiced. Just because you'd have been Theta!"

"Of course I'm prejudiced."

"Well, you're loyal, anyhow. I'll say that much for you. I don't blame you for sticking up for your mother's bunch. But take my word for it, Jenny, it's a lot of nonsense. They're just imitating the men with their Greek letters, these women's sororities!"

"Oh—you make me furious! As though women aren't ten times fonder of one another than men ever are!"

"Why, you little suffragette! You'll be wanting to vote, next."

"Of course I want to vote. I will, too. Wait and see."

He didn't believe that.

"Woman's place is in the home," he told her, and just in time she caught the twinkle in his eyes, and stopped, her outburst dying on her lips, and looked at him, while he shouted with laughter.

"Jenny, you're wonderful! Will you vote for me, when I'm governor of the state? I mean, when I run for office?"

"Oh, Merle—do you think—do you want to be?"

"Well, what are my chances?"

"You ought to be for woman's suffrage," she told him. "All of them would vote for you—you're so terribly handsome."

"Hit!" he cried, and then, "That makes us even, Miss Fresh!"

One evening he met her on the street as she came from the bank and walked home with her. He told her all the news of Marian and she told him what Dunny had written.

"Are you going over to visit her next week? Marian says she's asked you."

"I'm not going, Merle."

"Why not? You'll have a grand time."

"I'll tell you," said Jenny, "I haven't the right clothes, and I don't want to get them, and I can't take time off from my job, and I'd only be more dissatisfied afterward. Want any more reasons, Mister?"

Merle stopped and looked at her. His keen blue eyes

were serious. He was touched with awkwardness, an unexpected sympathy.

"You should worry about that bunch of four-flushers," he said. "You have them all beat! Not a girl I met while I was over there was half as keen a girl as yourself, Jenny. You've got the real article—class! Marian's got it, too. But Marian can't tell the difference between those that have and those that haven't, as I can."

Jenny thanked him, murmuringly, for his kindness, and he flushed and laughed a little.

"Now you're being subtle, and we can't have that," he told her, and then, "You could have knocked me over, when you and Dunny came along and told us you were engaged. I don't know why I was so floored. I knew Dunny worshiped you, but I didn't know you liked him—that much. Dunny's a deep one, and I think you're as bad. It was like him to care for you."

"Instead of some one obvious, like Marian?" said Jenny, hurt, she knew not why.

Merle frowned.

"Marian obvious? What do you mean? That sounds unkind to me." But her remark had disturbed him.

Jenny said, "Oh, never mind me. You're tiresome, Merle."

She was happier when she did not see him. Days passed, one after another, in a false security. No girl could have been insensible to Dunny's devotion. His letters were charming, complete and satisfying in detail, warm in regard for her. He wrote to her of his dreams and hopes, but his letters were never lacking in the deepest respect and admiration. She did not write every day, as he did, but wrote as often as she could, and

wrote, instinctively again, what she felt that he wanted, instead of her own thoughts.

Marian did not come to Hilltown for Thanksgiving. She was invited, and Merle was included in the invitation, to visit friends in the northern part of the state. New friends. But at Christmas the four were together again. And Jenny saw how confident of Merle Marian was, and how much she was justified in this attitude, as Merle seemed to adore his girl. But there was this difference, that all through the holidays, the good times they had, Merle included Jenny in a way he had never done before. He seemed to have a new affection, a new regard for her, as though, now that she was Dunny's, and Marian his, he could express his esteem for her more freely and naturally.

The two weeks passed in such a round of parties and dances that afterward Jenny wondered if they had been home, or it had just been a dream. Only one afternoon retained reality out of the Christmas whirl. Dunny had met her at the bank and walked home with her. They sat in the old dining-room, with its time-blackened walnut furnishings. Jenny had worked until late at nights, cleaning and scouring the house against Dunny's coming. A fire burned in the newly blackened heater. She had covered the old cushions on the window-seat. Dunny, sitting there, his arm around Jenny, talked to her about her father.

"Jenny, Father and I were talking about it, and he's all for trying to get your father a pardon. Father has good connections. He thinks he might influence the governor, although you must never tell that to any one. Let it come as a spontaneous act. If it's managed right, perhaps he can be home before we are married. Would you like that, Jenny?"

Tears gushed into her eyes. She kissed his hand.

"You are too wonderful to me, Dunny! Oh—I've always dreamed of such a thing. But *I* could never have managed it."

"Well, of course, we don't know yet. It may take a while. And you're not to tell your mother. It would be too disappointing, if we failed."

"I'll not tell her. I'll wait to see, Dunny. When I think of him—— It's twenty years now, Dunny. Twenty years—in prison! For just one thing. It doesn't seem as though anything could be terrible enough to have to pay for it—for ever. Surely they could pardon him after all this time."

She was crying, and Dunny stroked her cheek.

"You aren't happy, Jenny," he said at last. "It worries me. I think about it a great deal—that my girl isn't a happy girl. I know how hard things are for you, but I love you so—doesn't that make it better? If you'd like to be married, now, you could come east with me."

"I could get a job there," she said eagerly, brightening. "Mr. Bowen says I know a great deal about business. I'm quite a good clerk, now. I'd not be a bit of expense to you, that way. Perhaps we could have a tiny flat."

"Oh, I wouldn't want you to work. I'd ask my father to let me have more money. I think he would do it."

"But, Dunny—if Daddy—did come home—I'd already be married. I'd better stay with Mother, till then."

"I suppose so. But I hate to leave you here, Jenny. I worry about you. Sometimes, in your letters, it seems that I can't find you. I feel as though I just held a piece of paper in my hand—not a message from you. I can't describe it. I'm not reproaching you. It's

wonderful of you to write to me at all. But I'd like to have you with me. I'm frightened sometimes."

She drew away from him, repressing the desire that flooded over her again, to confide in him about Merle—to talk it all away.

"Let's wait. If Daddy comes home, I could go back with you next year. I'd have some money saved, and really—I like working. In a few years many women will work. I'm almost the only one here now, except the girls that work at the mills. It's nice to have my own money, to feel that I can take care of myself and my mother. What would she do, if I went east with you, Dunny? We were awfully hard up, before I got my job."

"All right—we'll wait. But tell me again that you love me."

She whispered it falteringly. He kissed her somewhat moodily.

"And you'll be true to me always?"

"Always, Dunny!"

"Forgive me, darling—it's a question I should never ask."

And now, he was gone, and the two weeks of Christmas had left Jenny wildly unhappy and rebellious with everything. She had been steady enough all fall. But it seemed now as if the winter had only commenced. Sometimes she felt that each day was repeating itself, that the calendar remained unchanged, morning after morning. Her mother put a few more sticks on the fire and read on. She was reading philosophy now, and sometimes she talked about it, but Jenny did not listen. Her mother's mental adventures were as unreal to her as Jenny's actual experiences were to her mother.

It must have been some time in February that Merle began to come to the Opera-House and stand about and talk to her until she was through and then walk home with her. He was lonely, too. Marian had been initiated. He told Jenny soberly:

"I told her she ought to go with some of the boys over there. No use her missing the dances and other good times, just because she's going to marry me next summer. I want her to have a good time. She's been initiated now. She's terribly thrilled about it."

"I know—she wrote me a long letter. It sounded like a play."

They stood in the pale winter moonlight, before the Fowler house, talking in low voices. The ground was white with fresh snow, and snow clung to the old vine, to the great lilac bushes by the gate—Jenny listened to Merle, her hands thrust into a muff that had been her mother's, and was no longer correct in size and shape. Her long dark eyes rested on Merle's face, and she let herself go a little in response to the charm of him. He was big and kind, and warmth came from him, vitality and youth and abounding health. He was so straight that he seemed almost to lean backward. His wavy hair was crowded under a felt hat, his bright blue eyes were almost black in the moonlight, and his big bony hands were red with cold. He was telling her about his job at the farm paper—how they were starting the double entry bookkeeping there, and she nodded. She understood about books. She was warm with the sense that he liked to talk to her about his job, that he found her intelligent, and a good listener.

One night she said to him unexpectedly: "Have you forgotten that you were crazy about me once, Merle?"

He looked startled and laughed. His glance was amused and tender. "Of course not," he said staunchly, "but you have forgotten it."

"Never. I'll never forget that. Do you remember that night—when you brought me home from the senior dance—in the yard——"

She could not finish. Her heart was racing. She looked up at him helplessly. The blood poured up into her face. It came over her like a wave, her love and her weakness where Merle was concerned, her helplessness. She had never realized it so before. It was impossible for her not to try to draw him, to rouse him. She could not lift her eyes again to his amazed glance. But he was smiling with delight.

"Why, Jenny—what a little coquette you are!" he said, a new tone in his voice. "Who'd have thought it of you, Jenny?"

She laughed foolishly. "Why shouldn't I remember?" she said proudly. "I didn't let every one kiss me! I've a right to remember."

"Of course—you mustn't forget! Only——"

He stopped, and she turned and ran into the house, and with the door closed behind her she began to cry with shame and anger at herself. She did not see Merle for a week, and then he came to the show and waited for her.

"Let's go to Miller's and get hot chocolate."

"No, let's go home. I'll make some coffee."

She pushed back the ornate top of the heater and placed the coffee-pot on the lid beneath it. Mrs. Fowler spoke to Merle absent-mindedly, and took her book away up-stairs. The dining-room was still pleasant and comfortable from the efforts Jenny had made for Christmas.

There was bittersweet in a vase on the sideboard. Jenny opened the dampers and the stove glowed, and the heat and welcome poured out over them. The circle of light under the coal-oil lamp was unexpectedly cheerful and cozy.

They sat at the dining-room table, with coffee and cakes, two young things with a great deal of laughter in them. Jenny never laughed so with any one as she did with Merle. He was spontaneously funny, and he made her feel free and light of mood. Once, in moving the dishes, Merle's hand touched Jenny's and they were awkward and self-conscious for a moment, and then laughed a great deal again. Merle imitated for her a visiting preacher who had mispronounced some of his words. Jenny protested:

"I can't laugh any more. Oh, Merle, you're killing. You ought to be on the stage."

But after she had lain awake the whole night, remembering every small detail of speech and conversation, she resolved that she would not see him again, and he must have made a like resolution, for he visited Marian at college, and afterward he did not come to the grilled window for Jenny. Once he met her on the street and told her that he, too, had a job working at night. He was to keep the books for one of the merchants—two hours after supper, every evening. He could save every cent of the extra pay.

"If you need to work and save, think how much I need it!"

Jenny approved and commended this. Merle was ambitious to become an accountant of ability. He would have full charge of the books at the farm paper, in another year, with pay generous enough for a young man

to marry on, in those days. But the days seemed very long to Jenny now, although the evenings came early and it was dark when she rose in the morning. She dressed herself by lamplight in her cold room, before she went down to light fires and prepare her breakfast. It was the bleakest part of the year. The snow went off, and rain and cold repeated themselves monotonously.

Jenny felt herself the victim of a burning resentment which she could not understand. She hated her home with a positive passion of indignation. She looked at her mother coldly, half accusingly. Supposing her father came home now? What would he find? But she checked this thought, reminding herself in justice that it was his fault, not her mother's, that things had fallen out so ill for them. Yet she grew afraid. Her mother had waited all these years. What if she no longer loved her father? Jenny thought of that waste of years with an appalled realization. And she herself could scarcely last through this one lonely winter. Her mother had been young and charming and talented. She had had a small baby, and no husband to protect her. Going out to work, a modern and unprecedented thing even for Jenny, had not been considered as a possibility for Susan Fowler.

There was one thing about Dunny, Jenny told herself—she would be safe with him against all catastrophes. Stubbornly, with all her strength, she fixed her thought on Dunny.

CHAPTER FOUR

JENNY HAS A DREAM

THERE was a great sensation in Hilltown in March. The town buzzed with gossip. Molly Clarke's husband deserted her. There had been whispers of scandal all through the winter. Talk of blackmail. One day Molly came into the bank and deposited to her own private savings account twenty-five one-hundred-dollar bills. It was the cashier's early lunch hour and Jenny was at the window. She saw and counted the money. All of the bank employees knew about it. It was a notable deposit in a small-town bank. Where had Molly found that amount of money? Some man, some married man perhaps, had paid dearly for his folly. Two weeks after the deposit, when Molly had gone away to Stone City, Mr. Clarke came into the bank. Jenny stopped her work and stared at him. He had a round fat face, stamped with the marks of habitual good-humor, but it was red and congested now, with anger. He had a hoarse whispering voice. He was very smooth and sure of himself. His wife had deposited twenty-five hundred dollars to their mutual account. He wished to withdraw it. He was to join her in Stone City. They were transferring their account up there. The boy at the window went for Mr. Bowen.

"The money is in a private account. I can not give it to you."

He didn't take it easily. It was, he declared, a betrayal. And the next thing the town knew was that he had deserted Molly, in payment.

Jenny met Merle, and he asked her if it were true that Molly had twenty-five hundred dollars in the bank.

"I can't talk about people's deposits, Merle. You know that."

"Of course," he said absent-mindedly, and then, "Molly's in trouble. She's at Stone City. I had a letter from her. Her husband has left her, she says, and she's going to have a baby. She doesn't know where to turn."

"She wrote to you, Merle?"

He was shamefaced.

"One time," he explained, "she came to our house. I'll tell you all about it some time. My father and mother gave her protection for several days. Molly's had a terrible life, Jenny. You haven't any idea. My mother didn't feel right about it. It made trouble for my father that he befriended her. He told me then that Molly needed a friend more than any one he knew, and that, if I had the chance, I should be kind to her. She knew my mother didn't like her, and she never asked my father for help again, but she does ask me, once in a great while, to do something for her. I bought the lot at the cemetery where her father was buried, for her. And last year I straightened out a mess she got into over the taxes on her father's house. And one or two other little things. Mostly business matters. So now, she's in real trouble. But of course I shouldn't tell you. It's not a thing to talk to you about."

"Why not, Merle? I'm grown up. I feel sorry for her, too. But what can you do for her?"

"She wanted me to take her letter to Doctor Lunt. She didn't want to write to him because she was afraid Mrs. Lunt wouldn't like it. She wants Doctor Lunt to

find a home, here, for her baby. She says she can't keep it, and she doesn't want it put in an institution. So I'm going down there to Lunt's. I don't know why I tell you all this only it kind of weighs on me, and there's no one else that can keep still about things as you can, Jenny."

Jenny flushed with pleasure. She said sincerely: "I think you are wonderful, Merle—to befriend her. No one else would do it. You are always so generous!"

"I only hope it doesn't get me into trouble. If it ever does get me into any difficulty—you can tell Marian you knew about it."

"I will, of course. Only Marian would believe you, without my saying anything."

"I don't know. Women are funny. They seem to have a kind of fury against Molly. Maybe they're right. Even my mother—and Marian is like her. I wouldn't want Marian to know about this, Jenny."

"I won't tell any one, Merle. It's your affair."

"You're good. Would you read Molly's letter, Jenny? I'd like for you to read it. I—I want some one to see it, besides Doctor Lunt. I don't want to disturb my mother or father with it. But you've so much sense, Jenny."

"I'll read it if you want me to, Merle. It's just as you like."

"I'll go home with you before I go to Lunt's," he said.

In the dining-room he took the letter from his pocket and spread it out on the table to show Jenny. She felt that he disliked this whole business of Molly's, and that he wanted some one to understand his position. She was happy because he turned to her. Her heart lifted. She

looked up at him from her dark eyes. His own gaze was blue and steady, boyish, appealing. Jenny read the letter carefully. She was to remember the pointed thin characters, the stiff expensive paper, the general effect of care, of a fine pen-point and good ink, a meticulous exactness about it all, the kind of letter one of uncertain education writes on plain paper, with much thought and labor and the use of the dictionary before it is copied carefully, to mail.

Jenny gave the letter back to Merle gravely. Her manner was perfect.

"I would show it to Doctor Lunt and ask him what to do, Merle. He is very wise, and knows a great deal about every one in town. If Molly wishes to give her baby for adoption, he could probably arrange it better than any one, and then, too, you will have his protection."

"Thanks, Jenny. You're kind. Doesn't it seem to you, Jenny, as though we've grown up this year—or something? Don't you feel differently about things? I don't know how to say it—but—I think you're modern, Jenny. I know it's a hateful word, the way people use it, but I sort of think——" He stood in silence, frowning, and went on slowly, "I don't mean because you work—I don't mean wearing starched shirt-waists or anything like that. I think the world is going to change. Dunny thinks so, too. We've talked of it. I think this fury—this uncontrolled hatred for a woman like Molly, that good women feel—is going to give way to something kinder and more healing. You know, Jenny"—he was diffident—"I'm not religious. I don't believe in preaching and praying. But kindness, now—that's religion. Isn't it?"

"It's the essence of it, perhaps. No one is kinder than you are, Merle."

"Yes," he said, "Dunny is kinder. He knows how to be. He isn't confused, as I am. Dunny knows what's right, and does it. I don't know. Often two things seem right to me. Not that I worry about it. I do one, and forget the other. But Dunny knows——"

That night Jenny had a dream. She dreamed she was on the train with Dunny, that they were married and going away together. And in her dream she was in the greatest distress. It did not seem possible that she was married to Dunny, and that this marriage was to last for ever, her one, her only chance. There was a kind of berth on the train, in which she sat hunched up, waiting for her husband, and the curtains parted, and it was Merle who looked in, who took her face in his hands and kissed her, and she said to him, "Oh, I am so glad you got here in time. I am so glad you got here. Oh, Merle, I am so glad." She kept saying it over and over until she awakened, and when she did it was with a strong sense of escape. She felt that the jaws of peril had almost clicked shut upon her. Her heart was beating furiously, and her whole body was trembling with release.

She rose at once and dressed herself and went downstairs and built up the fires, though it was very early in the morning. She sat by the stove in the cold dining-room and thought. It was as if she had never used her mind before. She saw clearly that she had done a great wrong to Dunny, to protect herself by becoming engaged to him. She loved Merle. She could no longer evade this knowledge.

When she was with Dunny, and Merle away, she

seemed to be all right. If she had gone east with him Christmas!—His instinct had been sound. Once married, all this might have changed. But the marriage became progressively more impossible.

But Dunny loved her. His hands trembled when he touched her, there was a depth in his fine voice. He felt as she felt toward Merle—starved, wounded. Oh, everything was wrong!

She felt desperately the need of a confidant, of guidance, but there was no one to whom she could ease her heart. All the long succession of girlish confidences in Marian were not like this. It was a thing she could not tell to any of the three who stood nearest to her: to Merle, to Dunny or to Marian. It did not even occur to her to talk to her mother. And she must not hurt Dunny, now. She had given him her promise. She had been wearing his ring for months. Every one in town knew of their engagement. But she did not love him. She could scarcely understand how she had become entangled in such a position.

Ah, first love was true love! That night, long ago, in the garden, she remembered, her lips and Merle's had touched with magic. There had been that never-to-come-again thrill of young love. She could still have Merle, she thought dangerously. Marian could not love him as she did! Abruptly she was mature, powerful and passionate. Her dream had revealed to her the poignancy of intensity possible between a man and a woman, between herself and Merle. And was she to miss this? To have only a half portion?

She got up and walked about, appalled at the fierceness of her own thoughts. The Victorian definition of "lady" still lay upon the world. Was Jenny, then, to

take Marian's man and discard Dunny? Was she to rob her best, her dearest friend? She saw, sorrowfully, that her friendship and affection for Marian had dwindled away to nothing. Since Marian had gone away, they had drifted apart. They wrote, yes, but their interests were different, the contrast in their habits painful. Marian had new friends, now, sorority sisters, a roommate whom she loved dearly, and with whom she was to exchange visits in the summer.

But that did not change the situation, Jenny reminded herself firmly. Marian's advantages would be more real than ever, if Jenny were unfaithful. But the burning pain in her heart was intolerable. She closed her eyes and stood by the table, her hands knotted along its edge, and remembered the dream, remembered the touch of Merle's lips.

Merle, she sensed intuitively, would be happy with Marian or with herself. His life would be much the same, no matter whom he married. And Marian could feel toward some other boy the same romantic impulse she felt for Merle. But Jenny and Dunny would never change. . . .

"I'll never see him again, alone," she resolved, "whether I marry Dunny, or don't marry him, I'll keep as far from Merle as the town permits. He'll be married in a few months, and then I won't think of him any more."

And she meant it. But she began to pine. Her body grew light, her eyes enormous. She kept Dunny's letters all day without reading them. She was as dreamy and inattentive, at home, as her own mother. The endless affairs of the town went on without impressing her. Mrs. Bonniwell's son died, and the old lady went to

New York and brought her tiny granddaughter home. The Burch mill burned, and Mr. Bowen's wife bore him a son. Judge Lattimer's wife was confined, and almost died. For three days her life hung in the balance; and then she made slow recovery, with her little new son beside her. Merle's mother fell and broke her arm. The bank foreclosed a mortgage on the Hitch farm. Every week something happened, but time stood still for Jenny. She felt that it would be winter for ever, the same winter.

And then spring came, warm, sweet, seductive, spring over the valley, the loveliest spring that Jenny had ever known. The air was silken and soft. The buds of the tulip trees were stiff and waxen. The orchards bloomed in seas of white and pink. At the Falls the wild flowers, the early hepaticas, and "boys and girls," the Dutchman's-breeches, the violets and May-apples, the jack-in-the-pulpits and the wild phlox made the cliffs a wall of color. In the daytime the sun had already a touch of heat, and at night a thin wrap was enough, and a great silver moon rose over the river.

Spring and youth, and loneliness.

Jenny sat on the front steps of her mother's house one night, drinking in the intoxicating perfume of the tuberoses she had uncovered, watching the moon ride clear of the feathering trees. It was ten o'clock, an hour past bedtime in Hilltown. Merle came by alone. He stopped, and came in and sat down on the step below her.

"I'm tired, Jenny," he said simply.

He looked unhappy, too. He leaned his head against her knee. Her hand fell on his cheek. For a long time they sat so, and then Merle began to talk to her about

his work. He wasn't sure he was doing the right thing. He could do it. He was careful enough, and good at figures, but it was so limited. He didn't want to be an accountant. He wanted something with more adventure in it, more opportunity for initiative.

"It seems strange to me, too, Merle—for you to be keeping books. It seems that you ought to be doing something splendid."

"What, Jenny?"

"Oh, be governor, as you said once, or even president. Why not? Or be a playwright and produce your own plays. Or be a captain of industry, though I'm not sure just what that is."

"Do you think I could be something wonderful, Jenny?"

"I think you are already. I think you are gifted."

"But I have to make a living. All those things take time. I'm going to be married."

"Ah, yes," she said. "I forgot."

He got up in a little while, without speaking, and went home.

But the next night he paused, going by. Jenny was on the bench and saw him, but did not speak. There was a pale yellow glow against the screen. Her mother was reading in the dining-room. The next night, by the most tremendous effort, she stayed in the house and washed her hair, and cleaned and scoured the kitchen, and went early to bed. But the next she was on the bench again, and Merle paused and asked:

"Are you there, Jenny?"

"Yes."

"May I stop?"

"If you wish, Merle."

The bench was in deep shadow, though the moonlight was brilliant. Jenny's face glimmered above the collar of her white voile shirt-waist. Her black mohair skirt, long and pleated, her black stockings and small black oxfords were lost in the shadow. Merle sat down beside her, and gradually he relaxed. They talked in low voices until the town clock struck twelve, and he rose hastily and went home.

But after that he stopped nearly every evening as he came home from his two hours' bookkeeping. And nearly every night Jenny was there. She was entirely unchaperoned. She had a freedom that was to be common enough in another generation. But she was not prepared to deal with it. In her training and her ideas she was like other girls of her own day.

They talked about many things, those nights, talked long and intimately. For several weeks they drifted into a deepening stream. They were guarded with each other, meticulous, speaking often of Marian and Dunny, in bright sustained voices. And then one night, quite simply and naturally a silence fell on them, and Merle drew her into his arms and kissed her for a long time. She sighed and rested against him. Her eyes filled with tears and he kissed them away.

"Jenny," he whispered, "what are we to do?"

"Nothing," she said.

He could laugh a little, shakily, at that. "You think we can do nothing?"

"No. We have this spring—a few weeks, and then we'll have to say good-by to each other. I've given my promise."

"And I've exacted one," he answered soberly, and they sat very still.

“It came to me, like a blow, that night I showed you Molly’s letter, that it was you that I care for—you I trust and turn to. I knew then why I felt as I did when you and Dunny became engaged. Though I had no right to feel so, Jenny. I tried to stay away from you. But oh, Jenny——”

She was a high-school girl again. Her head lay on his shoulder with the weight of old longing. They were young and innocent. Up-stairs Susan Fowler had fallen asleep over a volume of Kant, entirely unaware of her daughter’s unhappiness and danger. Abruptly Merle kissed Jenny again and rose to leave her.

“I’ll see you to-morrow night,” he whispered. “We’ll have a few more dates together, anyhow, Jenny, before we quit?”

“You don’t think it’s wrong—to see each other now?”

“Now we know? I don’t know, Jenny. It can’t be very wrong—it’s so wonderful. Just let me come once more, Jenny—once or twice. I can’t say good-by to you to-night——”

She whispered assent, and they stood clinging together. The slow notes of the town clock fell between them. They drew away from each other with a great effort and whispered good night.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISASTER AND PROPHECY

THERE came, inevitably, the morning in May when Jenny wakened to the realization of disaster. She was sick with realization. She lifted her arms and drew herself up slowly against the head of the bed, while the red of shame burned over her face. Desolation and fear filled her, throbbed in her heart. But above everything else, above all the complications of her disaster was the first, the primal one of change. She would never be the same again. She would never be a girl again.

And this, then, was the fruit of the tree. This was the knowledge of good and evil. Carnal knowledge, the Bible called it. She remembered, she had read it somewhere, "And he had carnal knowledge of her."

She strove against the weight of sin on her heart. It was an intolerable burden. What they had done couldn't have been wrong—it had been so—right! But she could not avoid the deep, the irrevocable conviction of her sin.

"And he had carnal knowledge of her."

She wondered, wretchedly, if a bride would feel as she felt, and the answer in her heart was that, though ten times married she would know the same sense of desolation. She had entered into a new estate, into the estate of men and women who aped God and called themselves creators. All the whispering she and Marian and other girls, too, had done, the excited darting talk about Molly, was as words on the wind before the actuality of experience.

She could never more go back to yesterday. Even the

kisses she and Merle had stolen, though treacherous and dangerous, seemed to her now no more than the mischief of children playing with matches. But the damage, after all, was comparative, the conflagration complete.

A sudden darting thought swooped down upon her and pierced her.

She was like Molly now. She was a bad girl.

She rose stumbingly and went to the window where the fresh spring day lay golden and blue upon a pulsing world. And the thought of Merle came to her steadily. She thought of his bigness and cleanness, the color that came and went in his cheeks, his carved mouth, and happy laugh, his teasing mocking ways. Her breath came swiftly in a great sigh. Merle! Merle! No, whatever befell, she would not regret anything. If he married a thousand Marians, whatever lay before her, she could never have refused what he had scarcely asked!

She dressed herself. She sought for some comfort for herself, for this wound was too deep for tears. She had tried, before, to stop the friendship, she told herself, to stop these secret meetings. No one knew, she was sure. She had not gone out of her way to see him. She had tried, rather, to avoid him.

But the truth faced her down. She must be honest with herself. She saw her desire for him now as a separate thing, a positive, determined, ruthless element in her own nature, that had never yielded. Not fair to blame her mother, that she didn't know what Jenny did, or when she came in; not fair to blame circumstances, or opportunity. She was responsible only to herself and to Dunny. And she had betrayed both.

At the thought of Dunny, so vague all these weeks, she put the brush down on her dresser unsteadily. Well,

that was over now. Just why she thought it would be all right for Merle to go ahead and marry Marian, but wrong for her to marry Dunny, she did not know. But every one else would think so, if they knew,—Merle and Marian. She did not know what Dunny might think. He was unexpected. Dunny might understand, might even forgive her. But Jenny knew now, and accepted, with heart-break, the responsibility of having wronged her friend. But she would not—again. Now that she saw where everything led—how strong the current between herself and Merle—now she could beware!

It was easy enough to contemplate, for a moment. But the thought of Merle's kisses came back and made her lean against the dresser with a little moan. She could feel the weight of them, there in the secret shelter of the old porch, with the town dark and silent around them, and only the unseeing yellow eye of her mother's window. . . .

They had had their madness. Now, they must stop! Now she would live on alone, as her mother lived. She would never marry any one, never tell, never betray herself. She wouldn't write to Dunny for a few days, and then she would send back his ring and tell him it had been a mistake. He would let her go. She knew Dunny would not hold her against her will.

She found her mother already down-stairs. The dining-room windows were open, the table set for breakfast on a clean cloth. Her mother seemed unusually fresh and tidy and wide awake, this morning. She had spells now and then when she seemed to come to herself, to try, for a few days, to clean and cook, to mend her ways and look after Jenny. Jenny drank a little coffee, but she could not eat. She felt the telltale color ebb and

flow in her cheeks. Her mother looked at her with sharp black eyes.

"Jenny," she asked, "who is it that comes to see you at night?"

"Merle."

There was a long silence. Mrs. Fowler sighed. She put her hands upon her bare forearms as though they were cold.

"If I ask you not to see him again, will you obey me?"

"Yes."

"I should be very sorry to see your marriage spoiled."

"It's spoiled already, Mother."

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Fowler in a frightened voice.

Jenny dissembled. She did not intend to betray herself to her mother. Susan Fowler was too casual, her interest too brief.

"Only that I don't love Dunny. That's all. I never did. I've always been crazy about Merle. I thought I could marry Dunny, but I can't. I have too much regard for him!"

She got up as she spoke and went hastily from the house before her mother could detain her. She walked quietly along the street, speaking to neighbors, wondering how she could walk so, and speak so, and not betray herself. In the bank she went directly to her work and tried to keep her attention upon it, but her mind, in spite of her, went over and over the business of a letter to Dunny. She recited the words of it to herself, composed it and recomposed it, settled on its form and content, and then changed it all again. She dreaded horribly the necessity to hurt him. She felt very guilty. She would have liked to tell him everything. It was

her instinct to confide in Dunny completely, but she must protect Merle from Dunny's condemnation. Their conduct would be inexplicable to Dunny. She felt that she could not wait until noon, though what prospect of relief there could be then she did not know. When she came out of the bank she was upset to see Merle waiting for her. He fell in beside her, and they walked up the street together.

"I've written to Marian," he said.

She spoke to him coldly, over the pain in her heart, steadying, controlling herself:

"Don't you write to her every day?"

His glance was timid, beseeching. He smiled, then, and she saw his even white teeth.

"Not this kind of letter," he said. "I've written and told her that you and I are to be married. This is Friday. She'll get it to-morrow, about the time we're getting married. It's a hard thing to write to her, but better than letting her hear it accidentally."

Jenny had stopped short and stood looking at him, bewildered. This had not occurred to her at all. Merle took an envelope from his pocket.

"See," he said, "here it is. I wanted to show it to you."

Jenny felt terribly unhappy.

"I don't want to see it," she said, her lips trembling. "You must destroy it, Merle. It's nonsense. You can't do that to Marian. A boy can't——"

She turned and walked on quickly, afraid of tears. He walked beside her doggedly, and followed her up the outer steps and into her house. She turned in the narrow hall and spoke to him.

"About last night—I'd give anything—but we can't

change it. But we can ignore it. You must go ahead, as though it hadn't happened. You haven't any obligation to me. You wouldn't be happy with me. I don't want to marry you, Merle."

He leaned his shoulder against the wall and looked at her. He smiled a little. She felt in him an unexpected strength and stubbornness.

"Do you want to marry Dunny?" he said. "It's all off with Marian. But if you want to marry Dunny, I won't try to influence you."

"No—no. I'll never marry Dunny. It isn't that. I meant to break with him. But what has that to do with us!"

"Can't you see?"

"What do you mean?"

His voice was deep, compassionate.

"Don't be so frightened, dear. Jenny, come here, look at me. We love each other, don't we? Would you want Dunny to marry you, if he loved Marian? It isn't only last night—Jenny. Believe me, I've known for a long time. I haven't been writing to Marian very often lately. She knows something is wrong. She won't be surprised. She'll forget all about me in no time. As for Dunny—well—we belong to each other, Jenny. You're mine—my wife!"

Her hands shook in his, as she tried to draw them away.

"But I don't want to marry you," she whispered perversely. "I want—more than anything else—I want to redeem myself—to myself. Not do something worse. I can't. No, Merle, you must see all of the reasons. I'm engaged, and so are you. Last night—this whole spring has been wrong. We won't make it right—this way."

"It's the only way we can make it right, Jenny. I'll get the license this afternoon, and we'll tell our parents, yours and mine, and to-morrow, right after noon, we'll be married, and go away—to Stone City perhaps, for a day or two. Afterward, we can decide what to do. I'm serious, Jenny. I can't understand your attitude."

"I only want to do what's honorable," she said with difficulty.

"And what about my honor, Jenny?" he asked in a low shamed tone.

"You think perhaps I should be—grateful?" she flung at him.

But he shook his head. "I wasn't thinking that at all," he said gently. "I was just thinking that our debt to each other stands before anything else."

He would have put his arm around her, but she drew away.

"Not that way—let's use our minds——"

"Jenny, don't you see how I love you? I've been a boy—until this spring. Why should we resist our fate? Let us thank God, rather, that we are free to marry, without any one's interference!"

He stooped and kissed her cheek. Jenny was motionless, lost, far away from him. He stood patiently, anxious eyes upon her white face, his whole being waiting upon her. Mrs. Fowler came into the hall. Merle turned to her.

"Jenny and I are going to be married to-morrow, Mrs. Fowler," he said, as steadily as he could speak. "We'll work in the morning and we'll go to the Presbyterian preacher's study, right after noon, and be married—about one o'clock. We want you to come with us. I haven't told my parents yet."

Mrs. Fowler said nothing. Merle stooped and kissed Jenny's cheek again. He kissed her lips quickly. She gave a little cry.

"But I'm not going to marry you, Merle—I can't—I won't."

"Oh, yes you are," he said quietly and put his fingers under her chin. "You're going to marry me, to-morrow. And we'll make a go of it, too, Jenny. We'll be happy. We'll show them!"

They seemed to have forgotten the mother who stood there so still, not mattering.

"Do you think we can ever be happy, Merle—after what we are doing to Dunny and Marian?"

"That's already done," he said, and then: "Jenny, let's not talk any more. Let's just go ahead from here, and forget the rest. That's the way to do. Do you think I could marry any one else—now? There isn't any one else in the world for me, but you. I love you."

He turned and went away, looking back until the door closed, and opening it again to say to her:

"I'll see you this evening—I'm going to tell my people."

If he had not said that word—no one else for him "now"! Since he had known her, since he had possessed her, he meant. She turned slowly, full of dread, and met her mother's eyes.

"So," said Mrs. Fowler, "you have stolen him!"

"Mother—I——"

"Perhaps it is all I deserve," said her mother, shivering a little, "but it seems a hard fate—a murderer for my husband—a thief for my child."

"Mother—I—you——"

"Yes, it is my fault. But I thought you were all

Neade. I didn't think you had to be taught—control. I should have been down here with you, with the rooms all lighted, every night. I should have chaperoned you, protected you. But if it was in you—to do what you did——”

“Mother, I haven't done anything wrong!”

“Can you look at me and say that, Jenny?”

There was silence, and Mrs. Fowler said, after a long time, and neither of them ever forgot her words:

“You will have sorrow of this marriage. It will cost you dear. You can never find happiness on sin and betrayal. You are a thief, in love. You have taken him completely away from Marian. He loves you.”

The dark prophecy of her mother's words fell into Jenny's heart in a chilling silence—a fear so overwhelming that it was never to leave her.

Suddenly Jenny thought of Merle as she had always thought of him. She saw him as her husband, the one nearest to her of all, kind and gentle, gay and loving, Merle! It wasn't only the way out. It was what she had wanted always! She could see it, now. She remembered her dream about the train, and the strong sense of escape returned to her. She lifted her head proudly. Her face was closed, strong, even a little cruel.

“Whatever it costs,” she said, “I will pay it gladly. I will not be afraid to pay the last penny for Merle. I love him. He is mine, now.”

CHAPTER SIX

MARRIAGE AND BUSINESS AND FEAR

THE marriage was nothing less than a scandal. Even the conservative and considerate *Hilltown Journal* made some comment:

The Ferguson-Fowler wedding was a great surprise as it was generally believed that the affections of the young people were engaged elsewhere!

The town was shocked. Neither Merle's mother nor father came to the wedding. Only Merle and Jenny, Mrs. Fowler, the Reverend Mr. Oliphant and his wife were present. An increasing recklessness fired Jenny, but underneath it, she was hurt by the attitude she had known their friends would take. But Merle was calm and cheerful, undismayed.

They took the afternoon train to Stone City, and there was none to throw rice and old shoes, to call a confusion of good wishes and affectionate abuse, to smile and wave from the depot platform as the train drew out. The newly married couple went to Stone City's most presentable hotel, stayed there two days and two nights and returned to Hilltown Monday evening.

Jenny was increasingly amazed at Merle. She could not be happy, feeling keenly the censure of all their acquaintances, of the home town itself. She knew there would be speculations, whispers. She thought, too, of Dunny and Marian, and their families, their amazed resentment. She could not forget. Her head felt bowed with the accumulative accusations of these thoughts. The true and not ignoble feeling that had drawn Jenny,

and Merle together seemed almost destroyed, for her, by her realization of how it might appear to others. But Merle seemed to think of nothing but Jenny. He was as Marian had been, the summer before, happy and thrilled, his face reflecting his satisfaction. He was a bridegroom. He cajoled Jenny to eat, to walk, hired a rig to take her riding. He teased her into laughing. He wooed her and waited on her. He was tender and gay, inexpressibly gentle, fully and completely satisfied with the turn events had taken; without regrets. Mrs. Fowler's intuition was right. He was all Jenny's now. He loved her.

On their way back to Hilltown on Monday night, he said to her: "If you don't want to stay here, Jenny, we can go away. I can get a job anywhere, I think, and we can start new."

But Jenny shook her head. She smiled at him. She appreciated his offer. "No, we'll stay here, where every one knows all about us. And I will go on with my job for a while, Merle. I know people don't do that way, but our marriage is different anyhow. It will give us a chance to save for our own home. I—Mother's house isn't nice, Merle. But we can gradually fix it up. Perhaps, some day, we can live alone. I'd rather go on working, and be busy now."

He considered this gravely. "If you'll let me pay all the expenses, Jenny—if you'll save every cent of your pay—I wouldn't want you to do anything but depend on me. You'll be surprised, what good care I'll take of you, sweetheart."

She could not help feeling a little reluctant happiness to see Merle so happy, so confident of the future. He put his arms around her, coaxed her. "Let's make a

success of our marriage, Jenny," he said. "Don't look so sorrowful, sweetheart. People will soon forget, if we walk softly. My mother and father will forgive us, I know, when they see how much we mean to each other. It isn't in them to hold resentment. I want you to be happy. That's all I want."

His manner to her mother, who had an evening meal ready for them on their return, was perfect, respectful and submissive. He went out to his home and brought in his own possessions and put them in Jenny's room, and yet he seemed to know that it was strange to her to have him there, and did little to disturb her old habits. In the morning they walked down-town together, and Jenny went to the bank as usual.

Some of the boys in the bank teased her, one of them going so far as to say, for her to hear, "Lord deliver me from my friends!" But for the most part they liked Jenny and knew little of Marian. Mr. Bowen came out and shook hands with Jenny and wished her happiness. He and Mrs. Bowen, he said, were sending her some silver, for a wedding present. Jenny felt in his steady kindness a new richness and strength, and her heart went out to him in loving appreciation. She thought that if she could have chosen her own father it would have been some one like Mr. Bowen. He was forty then, spare and lean, a calm careful man of the highest integrity.

Mrs. Fowler did her best. She really made an effort, Jenny felt. But things were not as Jenny had dreamed marriage would be. It became evident, in a very short time, that Jenny and Merle would be happier away from Mrs. Fowler, and that she would be happier alone. She urged them to move. Jenny felt strangely reluctant to

leave her mother. For years, now, it had been Jenny who had looked after the meals and the fires. She had checked the complete deterioration of the household, and she did not know what would become of her mother, if she were gone.

"You must go," said Mrs. Fowler firmly, "if you can get a small house, or a few rooms. Mrs. Forsythe has those housekeeping rooms she fixed up for the school-teachers last year. They're empty. You can have your own bedroom things, and that little table in the parlor. It's old-fashioned, but it's a pretty thing, and solid mahogany. Your great grandfather brought it, and the tall clock, from Philadelphia with him, long ago. Mrs. Forsythe will put a stove and an ice-box in the kitchen for you, and you can get a little table and paint it for yourself and Merle. I've come into a little money, now, that will do me a long time. The farm did well last year. You won't need to help me. Just look after yourselves."

Merle was gentle about it. "Whatever you want to do, Jenny."

Jenny looked at him with a new element in her old love. She had never dreamed he was so steady. He seemed a man, grown now, and no one in her life, she felt, had ever loved her this way, with good humor, with consideration, and with warmth as well.

They moved into the rooms at Mrs. Forsythe's, and at once things were pleasanter. The rooms were upstairs, and they were sunny, with wide windows and clean fresh wall-paper. There was a tiny bathroom, a small bedroom converted into a kitchen by the addition of a sink with a tap in it (running water was a luxury in Hilltown, then), an ice-box, and a two-burner coal-oil

stove. They ate in the kitchen. They had a bedroom and sitting-room as well. It was possible for Jenny, who was remarkably competent, to keep these rooms shining and yet stay on at the bank. Neither of them could guess that the arrangement which seemed so practical to them, and so irregular to every one else, was to be an ordinary arrangement for young married people in another twenty-five years—a few rooms, two jobs, going out to work together in the mornings, Jenny getting home an hour or so before he did, with the groceries in her arms.

It seemed to her now that she had never lived or loved before.

Jenny was learning to laugh, with Merle, to make small jokes, to see life with a little more twinkle. They rose late on Sunday mornings, dawdled over their breakfast together, talking about a great many things, and especially about the future. Sometimes they went to church. Usually, on Sundays they dined at the hotel, or one of the town's smaller restaurants. They were much alone, but they were satisfied to be so for the present. Both of them had quit their evening jobs, and they ate breakfast together at their rooms, their luncheon together down-town, and dinner at the rooms again. Merle wiped the dishes and read. He brought his pay home to Jenny to dispense. He never drank, a failing common and disastrous among young men of his day. He was always with her, always the same.

One Sunday evening, when Jenny put her new green and white dishes on the little painted table, she said to Merle, as he sat reading:

"It's the first time in my life that I have ever lived in clean airy rooms, Merle. It isn't much, perhaps, but

it seems like heaven to me. When we go to housekeeping, I'll be sorry to leave here."

She was delighted with his continual cleanness and freshness. She had had no father or brother, not even a boy cousin, and there was novelty and adventure in sharing life with a young man as attractive as Merle. He seldom passed her without roughing her hair, or patting her shoulder or giving her arm a squeeze. He was innocent in his mind and heart, clean in his speech, free from sensuality. She saw that all the ideas she had had of men were unsound, if other men were like Merle, a matter difficult for her to believe. Where, she wondered, did girls get their heritage of false ideas, that men were brutes, lying in wait, like spiders, to seize and destroy? Nothing could have been nicer, more perfect, than Merle. No wonder she had always loved him! Her instinct about him had been right. There wasn't any one with whom she could have been so happy, so good. Her compunctions about Dunny faded a little. He was a man, and a brave and adequate man. He would manage his life intelligently and well. But the thought of Marian was sharp within her. As her happiness in Merle deepened, as she realized more fully every day her love for him, her sense of responsibility for Marian's loss became more vital.

She had fallen unconsciously into a bargaining frame of mind. If she kept the rooms that were home to them shining and clean, and herself exquisitely tidy; if she bore the snubs and conjectures of the townspeople without resentment, meekly; if she were a good wife to Merle and looked after his interests; if she did her work at the bank better every day; if she never failed to remember and care for her mother; if she always spoke fairly

and gently to her husband; if this, that and the other, the catastrophe which seemed to hang over her would be avoided. She might be able to pay the last farthing, the inevitable reckoning in all these little sums.

Marian had returned Merle's fraternity pin to him by registered mail, without comment. Jenny didn't want it. It meant nothing to her. It lay about among Merle's things for a long time, and then one day he put it on the vest of his good suit, and so began to wear it again. Jenny had received a letter from Dunny about a week after their marriage. She had written to him, the night before Merle and she were married. It had been a difficult letter, but she had managed a halting explanation. His letter, when it came, brought the tears to her eyes:

Dear Jenny: I was not surprised to learn that you care for some one else. I never made you happy. . . . I want you to have every chance for a full life. Merle is fine. I wish you both the utmost joy. You do not need to feel that you owe me anything, as, from the beginning, you were reluctant. I can see it now. But please leave me the privilege of your friendship, of wishing you well, and if I can be of any service to you, at any time, it will make me very happy.

Dunny.

Jenny showed this letter to Merle, who read it and returned it to her, but said nothing. She put it away with her father's picture and her few treasures. The ties were cut. Their bark was free.

That summer Jenny saw Marian on the street now and then, and they spoke to each other in ordinary voices, but Jenny's heart always beat slowly with dread,

her head lifted the slightest fraction of an inch, to see her old friend. The old relationship was gone for ever. Marian was pleasant, making no sign, but she seemed thinner, taller. Jenny did not know anything at all about Marian, or what she was doing or thinking. No one spoke of her to Jenny. At times Jenny missed the companionship and busy affection which had enriched her barren youth, but for the most part she was too busy, too wrapped up in Merle to want anything more.

One evening in August Merle came home very much excited. He had had an offer to go into business. Of course, he couldn't take it, but it had been a marvelous offer.

"Why can't you take it?"

"I haven't the money," he said. "You know Drysdale wants to get his money out of the *Hilltown Journal* and put more into the paper he has started in Stone City. The steak smells mighty good, Jenny. I'm starved."

"But tell me the rest," she insisted, turning the country-fried steak, preparing the milk for gravy, slicing chilled tomatoes deftly as she listened to him. Merle put the plates on the table, found the silver in a drawer, filled water glasses.

"What's the use of talking about it?" He was very eager to tell her. "Johnson came to me to-day. Drysdale has priced the physical assets of the paper at fourteen thousand dollars, and with half that in cash, he'll let it go. Johnson had been able to put up thirty-five hundred. He came to me and asked me if I could find that much, and go in with him, and we'd pay the balance, a thousand a year, out of earnings. Make the paper buy itself. He'll continue editing the paper, and he'll boss the mechanical end of it, the printing and job

work. He wanted me for a business manager and advertising man, to sell space, buy the supplies, keep the books and have the say about the pay-roll and all the finances. They haven't been making any money, but Johnson thinks they could. He's had it all to do and Drysdale has been discouraged and fighting him on everything. They have a linotype operator, a printer and a boy. I told him I had barely a thousand dollars. Drysdale has to have the seven thousand in cash for his paper at Stone City."

"But Merle, I've my savings, and there's five hundred dollars from my grandfather that's been lying in the bank accumulating interest all these years. I'm supposed to have it at twenty-one, but I could probably get it now. That would make about two thousand. Why, I didn't know we were so rich. That leaves only fifteen hundred."

"Only fifteen hundred! And besides, you're not to spend yours. That's for our home. We've got to buy our own home some day, Jenny."

"That can wait. Let's buy a business first. I think I can borrow a thousand dollars, or more. I think Mr. Bowen would lend it to me."

Merle shook his head. "We wouldn't earn enough to pay it back. We'd have to limit our earnings, Johnson and I, until we had paid Drysdale. I wouldn't get any more than I'm getting now, for several years. It would mean privations to pay the interest alone."

But Jenny went to Mr. Bowen the next morning. She was chilled with excitement. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright and determined.

"I haven't been spending a cent of my pay since I've been married and I could go on indefinitely without

spending it. You pay me fifteen dollars a week, and I'd put it all back—every cent. It would take a hundred weeks. Counting I might miss one or two payments—it would take me two years. We could manage the interest out of Merle's pay. It would be about ten dollars a month at first. I'm a good manager, Mr. Bowen. And if they failed—only they shan't—I'd pay it, anyhow. You see, my income would be independent of the business."

"Would Merle be willing to mortgage his interest to the bank?"

"Of course he would!"

"Go and get him then, and we'll fix him up."

Jenny's eyes filled with tears. She made a little gesture. "I'll never forget it, Mr. Bowen—never!" she said. She knew it was a personal loan. Her heart beat high with gratitude for his trust in her. She resolved that some day she would repay him—not only the money, but for the chance to do this for Merle. "I'll never forget it," she said again, and Mr. Bowen smiled at her vehemence.

"I believe you will remember, Jenny."

At first Merle objected, and then his desire and Jenny's enthusiasm won the day, and they entered into an agreement. Merle was to leave the farm paper in a week, and go down to the office of the *Hilltown Daily Journal*. It was a small office, with a plate-glass window looking out upon the square, the editorial, business and printing plant sharing a common room. Most of the machinery had been purchased second hand at bankruptcy sales, and was accordingly temperamental. But Johnson, a man of thirty-five with a large family of growing children, was a real editor, used to making

shifts, and Merle was young, undaunted by obstacles, with abounding enthusiasm.

For the first time since her marriage, Jenny felt a little comfort in her soul, some security in her daily walk. When these two years were over, and the note redeemed, and Merle had a full partnership in his own business, she would be free. Her marriage would be hers!

Her tenderness toward Merle increased. He was very appreciative. He worked tremendously hard. He left nothing undone. All of his vitality, which was the chief element of his charm, was poured out unstintingly. The prejudice of the town against their marriage seemed not to affect him. The business men did not care so much as the women, and they did not blame Merle so much as Jenny. Merle's quick eager ways, his smile and his earnestness began to show almost at once in the amount of business the paper had. He thought up schemes. He wrote ads and had them set up, pulled proofs and took them to prospects. He called on every merchant around the square every day. He brought in news items to Johnson, developed the classified department. He worked early and late. What he didn't know he was more than anxious to learn. If one thing failed, he turned his wits to another. He and Jenny consulted together, in the evenings, about everything. He brought her his problems, acted on her suggestions, had confidence in her judgment. She was increasingly shrewd about business. And his trust in her good sense made her happier than any other one thing.

She was full, those days, of a deep wisdom, maturity; ancient guile and craft were upon her. She was filling out, now, physically and mentally. Her extreme thinness, like her girlhood, lay behind her. Her throat was

firmer, her arms rounder, her limbs more beautiful. Her husky vibrant voice still showed the uncertainty she felt in her position, still showed the probation upon her, but that she was unsure did not mitigate her charm.

All the old sense of carnal sin had fallen away from her. Merle's attitude had erased it from her consciousness. He was always respectful to her, and never by word or look implied that she had ever been weak or wanton. And she saw that his attitude was sincere, not guarded. The very tone of his voice when he spoke to her, his "Jenny" was rich with regard of the highest and simplest order. She closed her eyes, at this tone, sometimes, with a little wordless prayer of gratitude. She loved him so, it would have destroyed her, she felt, if he had ever held her lightly. Sometimes, in the night, his whispered, half-shy words of love brought to her afresh the feeling she had first known the day her mother uttered her dark prophecies upon their marriage. Whatever came, whatever befell them, she would bear it all, she would bear anything for this: Merle's hand beneath her head, Merle's questioning voice, Merle always by her, walking, thinking, talking—with her! She would pay—let but the price come, and she would pay it. They would see how glad she would be, how proud, to walk on the fire, and drown in the water, for this!

Merle! Merle! There was nothing, there was no one else. She went, week after week, and cleaned and scrubbed her mother's house. She took cakes and pies to her, baked meat loaves and hot rolls, denied herself little luxuries to get them for Susan Fowler. She saw that there was ice in the summer, fuel in the winter. Mrs. Fowler seemed a little more faded, a little more remote. She was always pleasant and friendly to Jenny,

but made no response to the girl's starved love for her. Her attachment to the world seemed almost gone. Jenny felt at times that she would come some day and there would be no one in the house at all, nothing but the litter of books fresh from the library, the dust and disorder of the bedroom, the bed lying empty—its owner gone where no one could follow her, into a realm purely mental.

The months passed quickly. Whenever Jenny needed or wanted something which she had to deny herself in order to meet her obligation to the bank, it was with joy that she made the sacrifice. No one ever heard her complain or regret what she had set herself to do.

Winter came and went. Spring again, and their anniversary, and Merle and Jenny were scarcely sensible of the days. She had never been in such good health, and Merle, too, seemed younger, more vigorous week after week. It was fall and winter again, and the second spring drew near. There was only another month or two, at last, until the whole fifteen hundred dollars would be paid. And both years the paper had paid a thousand dollars to Drysdale and kept up the interest on the balance due him.

Sometimes, if Merle were late, if he were delayed, a wild fear flamed in Jenny's heart. What if he were killed! What if something happened to him! She was seized with trembling. Sick terror engulfed her. Ah, now, when everything was shaping so well, when they were planning to go to housekeeping in August, when they had chosen the house and agreed on the rent they would pay until they could buy it, when she had selected the furniture she could afford to buy, and allowed herself to dream of a baby—now, when friends and neigh-

bors were beginning to forget the old story, it would be like Life to snatch him away from her. At such times she wondered if they had been wise to wait. She must have a child of Merle's before she lost him!

Yet Merle would come in healthy and hungry, cheerful and tired.

"Jenny, we were talking about starting a paper at University Town. What do you think of it? Might start it next year. We need a subscription man now. That fellow from the Capitol Press was down here again, and wants to put on a campaign for us. Why, Jenny, you're as white as a sheet. Come here, and sit on your husband's knee——"

His arm would enfold her, he would kiss her and fall back at once into eager talk about the paper. Always the paper. And the blood would creep slowly back into Jenny's heart. Not this time! It hadn't happened this time. He was home safe to-night. Yet a little while had the separation that impended been postponed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DEATH AND RESURRECTION

IT WAS odd that on the day when Mr. Bowen gave Jenny her note, with its many memoranda on the back, and the stamp, "PAID IN FULL" across the face of it, she should meet Dunny on the street. It was this summer that she and Dunny were to have been in Europe—and Jenny was a wife of two years' standing, her husband prospering and secure. Merle had told her that Dunny was back for good. He had seen him downtown, and they had shaken hands and talked a little while. Dunny was a member of the bar, now. He was in his father's office, one of the firm. He was absolutely unchanged, Jenny thought. He looked just as he had the last time she had seen him, the Christmas before her marriage. She remembered now, self-consciously, her conversation with him then. He had stayed in the East the two summers since that Christmas and gone to summer school. He had been home only for short visits, and then neither Jenny nor Merle had seen him.

Dunny came to her at once, when he saw her, with his hat in one hand, and he took her hand warmly in his own. She was conscious of the curious eyes of the townspeople, but Dunny seemed entirely unaware of them. How generous he was, to show no resentment!

"It's good to see you, Jenny," he said eagerly. "How well you look! You've grown to be a very lovely woman."

She was wearing a white linen dress, a made-over dress which fitted her developing figure closely. She noticed how well-groomed, how clipped and cut he looked: his

clear brown skin, his fine brown eyes, his well-set lips and straight patrician nose, his air, almost dandified, of elegance. She had forgotten many little things about him. He looked at her with open admiration, and she felt the color come into her cheeks, at his regard. Without staring, he saw her—her dark smooth hair, her clear, pale, dark skin, her long eyes and firm throat, her lovely mouth, her lovely body—Dunny's smile was uncertain for a moment. He began to speak more quickly.

"Merle has been telling me, Jenny, how you've helped him to get started. I think that's wonderful of you—and like you, too. Here you are, going ahead, and being such a modern young woman, and in the East all the women do is talk about it. I'd like for some of the suffragettes I knew who are most rampant, to know about you! I want you to let me come to see you, will you, Jenny? For old time's sake? It looks as if Merle and Johnson and myself and the rest of the young fellows are going to be running the old town. We'll have to stand together."

"We're going to move to Tenth Street, into the house that Doctor Lunt built for his daughter, in a few weeks. You come when we are moved and settled, Dunny. We're just in housekeeping rooms, now." She stood smiling at him. She wanted to show him her note, marked PAID IN FULL, to tell him about everything, to explain just what had happened without any reservations, at all. She was amazed at her lack of reserve with Dunny. The old impulse to talk to him, to tell him, was upon her, but she only added to her invitation the prim words that they would be glad to entertain him, "when we have moved."

"Where you live doesn't matter to me, Jenny."

"I know," she said.

He asked her about her mother and she answered vaguely. Her mother seemed unchanged. Dunny said gravely:

"My own father isn't well. He's getting along in years. It's time I was home to help him. Jenny, do you remember that we talked once about the possibility of your father's return home? It seems strange that we should have had word about that to-day. I was going to find Merle and tell him. It's taken a long time. He was called before the pardon board each year, but there were so many that only a few got through. But it seems he's been ill—Father has the letter. They're going to send him home. It's practically certain. Your mother has probably had word about it, by now."

Jenny's face was white, even her lips. "I haven't seen my mother since yesterday morning. If she had word then, she didn't tell me. But of course, the mail wasn't out then."

"Perhaps the letter was delayed," he said comfortingly, and Jenny was struck afresh with the lack of change in him. He still had that manner, that breeding that made him superior in some way to any other man she knew. "She may have had some word since you saw her. I hope it works out all right, Jenny."

"Did the letter say—what his illness was, Dunny?"

"Yes, it did. It seemed to be some lung trouble and other complications. But then, he's still a young man, Jenny."

"I think I'll go see my mother now," she said, and then, "Thank you, Dunny. Thank you for everything." Her knees were trembling.

His look was extremely sympathetic. He turned and

walked a little way with her, saw her safely across the street before he left her, but she was scarcely aware of him.

Her father at home again! Her father, ill, with "some lung trouble," tuberculosis, probably, to come back after all these years. Jenny was frightened for her mother, now that the thing was become real. This might prove a mixed blessing. What would her mother do about it! How would she cope with a sick man, home, paroled, after twenty-two years? Jenny hurried along, and turned into the tall, narrow, unpainted house. She stopped and went back and saw that there was something in the mail box. She took it out—a card from the library for an overdue book, a letter from the warden of the prison at Michigan City.

Jenny went into the house, calling her mother. Her own voice was loud and frightened. No one answered. Jenny grew terrified. She went back through the kitchen and dining-room. The house was empty. Flies droned against the uncurtained windows. Dishes were sitting on the table, left from breakfast. There was a cup with a little cold coffee in the bottom of it, a bowl from which cereal had been eaten. The back door was open. The cat cried at the screen.

Jenny went back and ran up the steep narrow stairs. Her mother's bed was made, the room empty. She turned to her own room. Her furniture had been taken out, so long ago, when she and Merle went to Mrs. Forsythe's housekeeping rooms. But there was an old rocker pulled up before the open windows, and Jenny could see the top of her mother's head. One hand hung limply down beside her, and a clean, still folded handkerchief had fallen from it to the floor.

Jenny flew to the chair and bent above her mother. She appeared at first glance to be sleeping, but Jenny knew at once that she was dead. The girl stood, trembling, and looked down at her mother. The soft, streaked black hair was clean and freshly, carefully, brushed and combed. Her mother's face and hands were clean and white, her dress was fresh, and she wore black silk stockings which Jenny had given her, and her low black shoes were polished. Never, in her life, had Jenny seen her mother so tidy and presentable. She wore at the opening of her dress an enameled pin, with a silver binding and white lilies on a blue background. Jenny did not remember that she had ever seen it before. There was not a book, magazine, or newspaper near her. She had made her bed, tidied her house, bathed and dressed herself, and come in here, alone—to sit in this chair. . . .

With a cry Jenny ran from the room, and down the stairs and out into the street. A neighbor woman was passing, and the girl flung herself headlong, weeping wildly, into her arms.

It wasn't until late that night, as Jenny and Merle sat in the old dining-room together, keeping watch, that Jenny remembered the letter. She got it out of her purse and held it for a moment in her hand. It looked—it certainly looked—as if the letter had been opened and sealed again, but she could not be sure. There was a tiny tear in the flap, a blistered appearance that bespoke the use of some heavier paste than ordinary flap mucilage. There were many things that disturbed Jenny, but she spoke of them to no one, for they were little things that only a person who had lived long with her mother would notice. Jenny tore the letter open

roughly and crumpled the envelope. She read the letter, and in silence and dismay handed it to Merle.

There were the usual formalities of name and address, but the substance of the letter was that Convict No—— Ian Fowler, sentenced to life imprisonment in January, 1880, for homicide, was being discharged from prison because of ill health, and would be free to return to his home for an indefinite parole. Mrs. Fowler was invited to notify the prison authorities as to the hour and date at which some one would call for him, as he was too ill to travel alone.

He was coming home to die!

Merle gave a little whistle and looked at Jenny ruefully.

"I'll have to go get him right away, Jenny."

"Oh, Merle!"

"This will be an awful blow to him—to find your mother gone."

Jenny was silent. All day she had been borne down, weighted, with the tragedy, not of her mother's death, but of her life. A thousand things came back to her from her childhood, things she had forgotten now fresh and significant. What if she had to lose Merle in the first happiness of marriage? Jenny was unreasonably sure that her mother, dismayed and unready to face the responsibility of her father's return, had taken her own life. There was no substantiation for this. Doctor Lunt had pronounced death due to heart failure. Mrs. Fowler had long had a faulty heart, the physician told Jenny. There had been an acute dilation, he diagnosed. But Jenny knew better. The house was in order such as her mother never maintained unaided. The dishes on the kitchen table seemed to Jenny a last artistic touch.

She had washed them, herself, and when her hands shook so that the cup fell and broke, she swept it out gladly and put it on the rubbish pile.

The house was mortgaged. Mrs. Fowler had mortgaged it when Jenny and Merle were married. These were the funds which she had said would last her a long time, and of which there was now only enough for a decent burial. Unpaid taxes were charged against the property. The house, Jenny felt, was worthless. She did not want to live in it again. She would let it go to the mortgagee for the face value of the paper. She was unreasonably glad that they could not redeem it.

But what would she do with her father? Regardless of cost or inconvenience his parole must be accepted, as the compensation to him to be out of prison in his last illness was greater than any sacrifice that could be made to attain it. Jenny and Merle decided to say nothing to him of Susan's death until Merle had brought him home. Directly after the funeral Merle was to go for his father-in-law and bring him back to Hilltown.

They buried Susan Fowler the next morning. The little house where Susan had lived so much alone bloomed with flowers. The town was not insensible to the drama of the situation. Kind hands swept and dusted, carried and cleaned. Baked chickens, platters of food, rolls and salads and extra chairs appeared out of the air. The shabby old house had a temporary air of luxury and comfort. Mr. Kent came and lent an extra team and buggy for Merle and Jenny. The pall-bearers were the finest men of the town: Mr. Bowen, Mr. Welch, Judge Lattimer, Mr. Johnson. The Harrisons, the Wards, the Thompsons, Mrs. Kent and Dunny, Mr. and Mrs. Caruthers and Marian. . . . It seemed that in

her death Susan Fowler did for Jenny what she had never been able to do for her before. She reestablished her in the place which was hers by birthright in the town. She had such a funeral as her forefathers had had and was laid away in the family lot with all the honor and respectability in which the town was skilled.

Jenny had to move at once after the funeral, to be ready in her new home against her father's return. And she found that the kindness of neighbors extended beyond her mother's burial. There were half a dozen women willing to help her with the actual labor of getting settled in the new home, and others sent in, as they had the day before, enough prepared food to last a week.

Every one was willing, now, to let the past go, to forget everything. Merle and Jenny, the women told one another, had been brave and they were having a hard time. They loved each other. Dunny evidently didn't care, but was friendly with both of them, and Marian would soon find some one else. It was useless to keep an indiscretion alive for ever.

But Jenny was sick with disappointment. The house they had rented stood on Tenth Street, not far from town. It was a new house. There were six rooms; a hall and four rooms and a bathroom down-stairs, two bedrooms and a small bath up-stairs. There was a furnace and hardwood floors. The house stood on an attractive corner lot and had great possibilities for improvement. It could easily be enlarged to eight or more rooms, with more building up-stairs, or the addition of an ell. All these things the young people had considered. They were to have the privilege of renting it until they could buy. It had seemed to Jenny that

it would be like heaven, it was so much nicer than any home she had ever known. But now . . .

Jenny was surprised to see how well her mother's old things looked in new bright surroundings. She had brought with her several pieces of amber glass, real Sandwich, and some fine china and blackened silver, had found that the small dim rugs when scrubbed still had vestiges of color, were tufted, hand-made rugs, practically indestructible, and very pretty on the new floors. She made the down-stairs bedroom up for her father, with her mother's things in it. She did not like this big old-fashioned furniture, but she could not afford to buy new. She left some things to be sold at auction, some to be burned.

Mr. Bowen made it possible for her to leave her job without giving notice.

But it was not to be as they had dreamed of it, just Merle and Jenny, and perhaps, in the spring, a son. Her life now would be devoted to the care and nursing of this stranger, this man who had begotten her, whose life had fallen like a blight across her mother's, withering and destroying it.

Jenny had never loved her mother as she did in these days. She worked at her moving with fierce energy, wiped her tears away impatiently, and went on, telling herself that this was something she could do for her mother, since her mother had been unwilling to do it for herself. Jenny's thought held no condemnation of Susan, only a great pity.

Dunny called at the house and offered to meet the train, but Jenny told him that she had already hired a carriage. He took her hand and squeezed it. His eyes were bright with tears.

"I'm afraid this hasn't turned out well for you—as I wanted it to, Jenny."

She was so tired she could easily have let herself go into tears at the touch of his kindness, but she held herself rigidly. She felt that she had foregone any rights to Dunny's sympathy and favors. It had taken tremendous effort to get things ready, but she had done it. She went to the train, and saw Merle, with the aid of the brakeman, help a tall cadaverous man down the steps. He looked a great deal older than Jenny had expected. He turned his head and his eyes, looking through the crowd, found her at once. Jenny moved toward him.

"Daddy!" she said.

He looked nothing like the picture of the young man with the mustache. He looked like no one she knew. His gaunt face was pale, with a dreadful waxen pallor. He was clean-shaved and partly bald. His eyes were veiled, expressionless, his wide thin-lipped mouth was set and cold. She went to him at once and lifted her face. He stooped and touched her cheek with his but did not kiss her.

"And you are Jenny?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"You look—like Susan. I thought for a moment it was she. Where is she?" His voice was flat and toneless.

Merle made some motion to Jenny. She did not answer her father's question, but turned and took her place beside him.

"We'd better go home. We can talk there," she said.

His hand fell heavily on her shoulder. He walked slowly and carefully. He was silent. Jenny felt herself strangled with sobs. Townspeople watched them with

covert curiosity and anxiety. Some one opened the door of the carriage. It was difficult for her father to lift his weight. Two men helped him. Jenny got in, thanking them blindly, and sat beside him. She felt such sorrow, such pain, that she could scarcely breathe. There was in her a great longing to pour her young strength into him. He was no longer a stranger. He was her father—hers. Her reluctance, her regret, had vanished at sight of him. His decent cloth suit hung loosely on his gaunt body. Jenny was holding his hand in her own feverishly. When they were at home, and in the house, she said:

“Do you want to lie down, Daddy? I’ll brew you some tea.”

He sat on the side of the bed in his own room and looked about him. His eyes came back to Jenny. His face was absolutely controlled. She could not fathom his thoughts, his impressions.

“This is your home, daughter?”

“Yes, Daddy. Mother’s home is sold. She had mortgaged it, and we couldn’t redeem it. Merle and I rent this house.”

“And where is Susan?”

How could she tell him? She looked at her husband helplessly. He put his arm around her. She heard his steady voice.

“Mother Fowler died a few days ago, sir. She had had heart trouble for some time. She never received the letter about your return.”

There was no movement from the man on the bed. He sat, bowed a little, his hands caught together between his knees. Jenny had the impression that the attitude was an old one, habitual. After a moment he stooped

forward and began to untie his shoes. His breath was laborious. Jenny went swiftly toward him and fell upon her knees to help him. He looked at her wonderingly, and then swept her back and away from him with a motion of his long, heavily boned arm. She looked at him in hurt surprise. He stared at her levelly. His breath came quickly.

"You're not to do that—for me. I'll wait on myself." There was humiliation, indignation, in his attitude.

Jenny rose. Her lips trembled. She looked at Merle, who shook his head.

"You go and prepare something for your father to eat, Jenny. I'll help him get to bed."

Jenny went into the kitchen, washed her streaming eyes and wiped her face dry, and made a pot of tea. She prepared a tray with thin slices of bread and butter, ham, pink and sweet, a glass jar of preserves and the fresh tea, and took it into the guest room. She found her father lying on top of the covers in his shirt, trousers and socks. Merle was talking to him cheerfully, and the younger man helped the older to sit up. Jenny put the tray on a chair beside the bed. He drank the tea and ate a little bread and butter slowly. When he had finished, he said in a low voice:

"Come here, daughter. Come to me."

She stood beside him. He looked at her searchingly.

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I don't want to be a burden on you," he said simply. "You should have told me, you and your young man, that your mother was gone, and I'd have stayed where I was. I'm not fit—for you to wait on me. When they told me I could come home, I thought of course, it would be to Susan, but that wasn't to be. But I want you to let

me wait on myself. I don't want to be a bother. I've forgotten the ways of home life, the courtesies of home living. I'm not much of a hand to talk. I've only a little while left. But you know—I appreciate it—being here. And I want you to tell me about your mother—how she lived and how she died.”

What could Jenny tell him? She drew a low chair near to his bed and sat in remembering silence.

“Mother didn't age a great deal,” she said at last carefully. “Her hair was streaked with gray, but she looked youthful. Didn't she, Merle? She seems to me to have been the same, from when I was a little girl. She didn't go out much, nor care for parties and such things. She loved to read and to talk. She kept house and sent me to school, and helped me with my lessons. Grandfather left her the farm. She sold it when I was fifteen, though I didn't know that until lately. Then she mortgaged the house, when I was married, though I didn't know that. She lived on the money that came in that way. Perhaps she wasn't a good manager, about money, but she was always kind, and charming, and gentle. She wanted Merle and me to go to housekeeping by ourselves, when we were married, but I went to see her every day of the world. I don't think I can tell you any more, Daddy, not now. Her life was very simple—the same, day after day. I never knew any one more charming. Every one admired her. The older men used to ask her advice. The whole town came to her funeral—we scarcely had room for the flowers, and the gifts, and the food. . . . She wore a little enameled pin—with lilies on it—when she died. I thought perhaps you had given it to her. We put it on her again when we dressed her.”

“Aye—I remember it well. I brought it from my

mother's things with me. It was the first gift I gave your mother."

"It seemed so hard that she never knew you were coming back. I think she looked forward to it always, though she never said much."

They were all silent. Ian Fowler sighed and closed his eyes.

"I think I want to rest," he said.

Jenny put a silver bell on the table beside his bed.

"If you want anything, Daddy—I'll hear you ring. This door is the clothes-closet door. This leads to your bathroom. I'll go ahead with my work, now. We aren't quite settled here."

She went with steady step, up the wide stairs to her own room. Here she closed the door and lay down across the bed to weep. Merle followed her. He sat down on the pillow beside her and drew her up into his arms, and so held her until the sobs that shook her abated a little. She longed to tell him that she thought her mother had feared this hour too much, but she could not betray her mother. Merle stroked her hair in silence. After a long time she said:

"Ah, Merle, if I had not you, what would I do?"

"You must be careful of your father's pride, Jenny. Let him do as much for himself as he can."

"Poor darling," she said. "What is the matter with him, Merle?"

"I talked to the prison doctor. He has a spot on one lung. But that is not serious, though it might become so. You must be very careful in nursing him, Jenny. He has nephritis. He is doomed. It may be a year or two—or longer—with good care, a steadily failing strength and health. When he gets so that he must

stay in bed all the time, we'll have a nurse. That will be easier for him to bear than to have you waiting on him. I think Johnson and I can increase our salaries, this year."

Jenny lay resting in her husband's arms. She was thinking of the baby that would have to wait again.

BOOK TWO

MERLE

CHAPTER EIGHT

JENNY WITHDRAWS FROM HER FATHER

JENNY closed the book from which she was reading aloud, and went to answer the door-bell. She was surprised to see Molly Winnet standing on the porch. She had not seen her now for years.

"Come in, Molly," she said courteously, and held wide the door.

Molly seemed a little uncertain for a moment, but she came in and Jenny led her into the living-room and drew a chair close to the fire for her, for the day was bitter cold.

"I wanted to see Merle," said Molly in a thin ladylike voice, as she sat down.

Molly had changed very little, Jenny thought. She wore a coat of rich black seal which she drew back, at the heat of the fire, from her thin body, with its small pointed breasts. She wore a black satin dress, stockings of the sheerest chiffon, and black patent leather slippers. Pearls which looked as though they might be real hung about her throat. She put back a dotted veil upon her hat. Her hair shone lustrous against the mink collar of her coat. Her thin face with the thin lips and nose, the slightly mottled complexion, was highly rouged, and her brilliant black eyes, between their long mascaraed lashes, seemed to Jenny the same eyes in the same sharp-featured face of the little girl whose reputation was already unsavory when she was in the eighth grade at school.

"Merle isn't here," said Jenny, turning away, in her thoughts, from the bleaker aspects of Molly's life, and

treating her as a guest. "But I can give him a message for you, or did you want to see him privately?"

"Yes," said Molly in the same thin correct voice. "It's personal. I wanted to ask him about something he did for me once, long ago."

"I'm sure," said Jenny, "that he will do what he can."

"Do you think he would be willing to telephone me and tell me when I can see him? I live at Stone City, but I know he wouldn't want me to go to the paper there for him." She spoke entirely without resentment, merely stating a fact. "So—if I could see him here——"

"Why don't you just wait for him, now you're here? I think that he'll be home at any time. I could telephone for him to come at once, if you can't wait."

"Would you?"

"Certainly."

Jenny went to the telephone and called the office of the *Hilltown Journal*. A masculine voice answered.

"Merle left for home a few minutes ago, Mrs. Ferguson."

"Thank you."

Jenny hung up the telephone receiver and went back to give the message to her guest. Molly was looking all around the room.

"Merle has done well, hasn't he?" she asked.

"Yes, he has. The paper is prospering more than they ever expected."

Molly nodded. "I always liked Merle," she confided to Jenny, and Jenny sensed in Molly a thousand secret likes and dislikes. "He was always nice to me. I'm glad he's succeeding. You own this house now, don't you?"

"Yes. We bought it last year. We had been planning to for a long time."

"I've always wanted a house of my own. How's your father, Jenny?"

"He seems about the same. It's wonderful that he keeps as well as he does."

"How long has he been home now? Five years?"

"It won't be five years until next summer. It was August when he came home. The doctors thought then that he couldn't live more than a year. But he grew so much better the first year it seemed as if he might recover his health. Nephritis, though, is something that doesn't get better. With careful nursing——"

Jenny was glad to hear Merle's step, and she excused herself and went to the door to greet him. He came in out of the frosty starlight night, big, vigorous, young, handsome, a little careless and untidy. He threw down his hat, drew off his great coat and flung it on to the little settee in the hall. He stooped and kissed Jenny's cheek briefly. She clung to him a little, and he patted her shoulder, saying something unimportant as he moved toward the living-room door.

"Molly's here, Merle."

He frowned at her. "Molly Winnet?"

"What other Molly could it be?"

"What does she want?"

Jenny smiled. "She said it's personal," she answered.

"It's probably about that kid of hers. Well, I'll go see her. Was there any other message?"

"Nothing at all. Mrs. Sims is out for the evening. I'll go back to Dad."

She went into the living-room with him, then left him with Molly and returned to her father's room. Fresh flowers stood, as usual, on the little table beside the bed. The gaunt man lying there in clean white pajamas

under a silken eiderdown, watched the door with a dog-like look of adoration.

“Company?” he asked jealously.

Jenny shook her head. “Just an old friend to see Merle. He’ll be in, in a little while.”

She took up the book and smoothed the page. It was the first volume of Plutarch. She was reading the life of Camillus. Something stirred in her mind. What was it? Something that might be important to her now. She drew a breath deeply against the pain in her heart. She began to read in a low voice, long trained now with reading aloud. She read without knowing the sense at all, and then came abruptly to attention:

And himself with the choicest of men hastening on, went at once to the Romans, where all giving way to him, and receiving him as their sole magistrate, with profound silence and order, he took the gold out of the scales, and delivered it to his officers, and commanded the Gauls to take their weights and scales and depart, saying it was customary with the Romans to deliver their country with iron, not with gold. And when Brennus began to rage and say that he was unjustly dealt with in such a breach of contract, Camillus answered——

She could see her mother’s beautiful hands spread upon these same pages, her mother’s cultured voice, speaking of Rome, beside which Athens was but a village! It was the night she had come in and told her mother that she was engaged, and her mother had said, “Is it Merle?” Intuition Susan Fowler had had. Jenny felt as if a cold wind blew on her cheek. She could hardly lift her voice to continue reading. Why should she feel still the weight of fear her mother had laid upon

her? She straightened herself deliberately and began to read more loudly. But presently her father's deep breathing assured her that he was asleep, and she let her voice gradually fall and falter away, having learned not to stop too suddenly, lest the tired eyes open again on a sleepless endless night. She turned the light farther away from him, opened the window a little, noiselessly, and went out of the room and closed the door silently behind her. The French doors between the living-room and dining-room were folded back. To the right was a door opening into the hall, and Jenny went through this and up the stairs to her own room.

They had done much to the house since they had bought it. It was now a charming place, within and without. Jenny, who had been reared among old things, in gloom and disorder, had in her own house much light and color and a great fastidiousness. She was in advance of the times in the use of color as in many other things. Hilltown people liked her house without quite approving. But for Jenny it satisfied a deep need. Merle had given her a free hand and she had spent money wisely, with individuality and good taste, for they prospered these days, out of all reason.

In her own room she had especially satisfied her desire for light and space and perfect order. The furniture she had brought from her mother's house had long since been removed to a new room built over the kitchen. Their bedroom was very light with fresh, white, satin-striped paper, with painted furniture, a deep-piled rose rug, shaded pastel lights by the dressing-table, a full-length mirror, and an immaculate private bathroom beyond.

Jenny went to her maple desk which stood between

the windows with their frilly curtains, sat down and tried to put her mind on her numerous affairs: letters to write, things to order from the city, entries for her household accounts book, work on the program committee of the woman's club—the ordinary affairs of an established woman in a small mid-western city. But the sudden, almost clairvoyant picture of her mother, which had risen unbidden while she was reading, had shaken her out of the strain and nervous irritation into which her days were fallen. She remembered poignantly her mother's words to her the day when Merle came and told her mother they were to be married, remembered them now, with fear more wise than she had known then.

Long ago, every one seemed to have forgotten that Merle had been engaged to Marian Caruthers, and Jenny to Dunny when they married each other. Or, if they remembered, they considered it with faint interest as something romantic and youthful. Merle was well on the way to becoming a rich man, according to the standards of the town. He had been reconciled to his parents for many years and had acted as pall-bearer when the elder Kent passed away. Jenny had been entertained at the Kents' among the other young matrons of the town. She had long since ceased to flush when she met Marian or Mrs. Caruthers. They spoke to one another always in friendly wise and were sometimes compelled to have business or committee work in common, but the old friendship and intimacy had never been renewed.

Jenny had everything now, it seemed, but the thing she craved most of all—a child. She was in constant slavish attention upon her father, torn with compassion, ruled by a desire to compensate to him. Her whole life lay under the shadow of the sick room. She knew that

this unreasonable devotion was coming between herself and Merle, that it vexed Merle to have her always at her father's beck and call. But though she knew there was danger to her marital happiness in her father's carefully preserved existence, she could do no less than serve the flickering flame of his life in every small exact detail.

Was this then, to be the "sorrow" her mother had spoken of? Some deep latent energy was now awake, and Jenny stared before her, her wide black eyes fixed upon space, as she thought. She was aroused from reverie by the voices of Merle and Molly at the door. She could not hear their words, but Molly's thin precise tones floated up to her. That ladylike voice of Molly's was really funny, Jenny thought. She waited, but Merle did not come up-stairs but went back to the living-room. After a little while Jenny said a wordless prayer and went down-stairs. Merle was sitting in an easy chair before the fire, reading the evening paper. He looked up and murmured something as Jenny came in and sat down near him. She sat in silence staring at the fire. Merle put the paper down and said irritably:

"What are you brooding about now, Jenny? I suppose we may as well get it over with. When you get this way——"

Jenny struggled to quench the flame of anger that would have answered him. She really tried. She spoke to him quietly, in a normal conversational tone.

"I had forgotten that Molly had a child."

"He's six or seven years old, now."

"Where is he, Merle? Who has him? You never told me."

Merle put the paper down.

"He's being reared in one of the nicest families in

town. I can't tell you about him, Jenny. You know I would if it were any of my affair, or yours either, but he's just a little waif. It was a case of substitution. But what do you think she wants now?"

"How could any one imagine what Molly Clarke would want?"

"She says she has saved ten thousand dollars. She has a chance to buy a half interest in a night club in Stone City, and she wants her baby back again!"

"Ten thousand dollars!" Jenny looked at Merle wide-eyed. "The traffic must be good, in Hilltown."

"It's mostly blackmail money," he answered, "collected here and elsewhere. She's a gold-digger for fair. But she isn't sure where the baby is, though she has her suspicions. It naturally comes down to a process of elimination, in a place as small as this. She wants me to speak to Doctor Lunt. She's afraid of his daughter. She says she's ready to change her ways."

"As if she could!" said Jenny.

"She says she hates men. It might be so. Life's queer."

They sat in silence, thinking about Molly, and Jenny said after a little:

"And Molly Clarke has a child—a little boy!"

He looked at her mildly. "Do you care so much, Jenny?"

She drew her breath sharply. "If I could go back six years," she said, "or even five—or four!"

Merle's expression was wary. He could not understand brooding and regretting. Instinctively he lifted his paper again, but Jenny said no more. They sat in an uneasy silence. Mrs. Sims, the practical nurse who looked after Jenny's father, came in and went through

to the sick man's room, nodding to them in her friendly way. Jenny's mood was strange. She felt rising in her heart like a tide, slow and strong, a resistance to her fate. Was she now to lose Merle this way? She saw, as from a distance, the development of strain and irritation between them the last four years. Merle was making money. He had more than repaid her for the help she had given him, by the prosperity they enjoyed now. He hated the restraint of his father-in-law's illness, hated Jenny's absorption. He disliked it that she mourned because she had no child. Now, seeing it, Jenny felt her heart beat strong. Once more the old ruthless desire for Merle governed her. Where had she been all these years since her mother died, communing in secret with her own soul, excluding him, at war with him?

With Jenny, thought was action. She rose and went over to Merle and, sitting down on the arm of his chair, said softly:

"I wouldn't change a thing—a day or an hour of our life, Merle."

"Of course you wouldn't." He smiled at her with unexpected coaxing.

Seeing his responsiveness she understood that he could do with her or do without her. It lay with her. He adjusted himself to her moods. His big arms swept her down now into his lap. Jenny's smile was tremulous. Merle was not much given to caresses, these days.

"Tell me what you have been doing to-day," she said, and he sat, with her head on his arm, his embrace lax about her long slender body, and talked to her.

"We saw Drysdale again about the Stone City paper. He wants me to manage it for him. He doesn't want to sell it. But he'll come to terms yet. Nobody else will

give him cash for it. I can't afford to manage it for anybody but myself. If he'll sell we'll take Martin's offer for the paper at University Town. That'll still give us two papers, but two much stronger. We got the advertising schedule from Hoskins again. The order came in to-day. Johnson wants his son to come in as a substitute on the linotype machine. I told him to use his own judgment, though he'd have his whole family on the pay-roll if I didn't discourage him. Oh, yes, what do you think? I knew I had news for you. I saw Dunny to-day, and he's going to be married. Guess."

Jenny sat up on his knees. She looked at him eagerly. "Marian?" she said.

Merle laughed. "What would he want to marry her for?" he asked. "He never did like her, even when she was a girl and charming. No, he's going to marry a youngster, the Lattimer girl. Edythe. She's eighteen."

"Why, Merle, Dunny must be thirty."

"All of it—and a darn' nice fellow. And making it! Johnson said Dunny made twenty thousand dollars in cold cash in fees on that Traction suit he had here. One week in court. Of course, his firm had work to do before that week, but he is certainly making money hands down."

"I wish he would marry Marian," she said in spite of herself.

Merle did not like for her to take any responsibility for Marian. But now he said:

"It's a queer thing about Marian. She was the prettiest girl in town when we were youngsters, and she had the most beaux, and here she is, teaching school. I met her down-town the other day, and she's fading,

actually! The other women your age and older look young, and you are lovelier all the time, my Jenny. But Marian is very thin. She seemed ready to blow away. Even her eyes are a lighter blue, and she was dressed primly. In a few years she'll be a real old maid."

"Merle, what do you think about us adopting a baby?"

"Oh, not yet," he said. "Lots of time for that—when we're sure——"

There came a faint moaning from the other room. Involuntarily, Jenny began to rise, but Merle pressed her down against him.

"Lie still," he said. "Let Mrs. Sims look after him."

Jenny was uneasy. Her new desire to be close to Merle again struggled with her habit of serving her father.

"He's been suffering a lot to-day, Merle. He likes for me to be near him. I don't see how it can be much longer for him." Her eyes filled with tears.

"You've been thinking that for two years, Jenny. He's strong—and young. He'll live a long time yet. You must accustom yourself to that idea and make your life more normal. One can do as you have done, for a few weeks, in a sick-room emergency, but not for years! I've noticed how closely you stay in the house. It vexes me, I admit. You should get out-of-doors more. With Mrs. Sims here you don't need to stay right in the house all the time. Get out and walk. Walk down-town with me in the morning and come to meet me at noon. Why don't you get your wraps on, and we'll go out now and tramp until bed-time? There's fresh snow on the ground. Remember how we used to walk when we were first married, Jenny?"

"I know. I noticed the snow at dusk."

"That's what you need—exercise! I see Dunny riding back and forth in that car of his, and it's not a mile from his mother's home to his office. I don't want to get old and soft. You're as slim as a reed, but you aren't so vigorous as you were."

Jenny laughed. She looked at him with tender amusement. How sweet it was to feel again his fond anxiety.

"Old Vim and Vigor!" she mocked, and then, anxious to be reassured, "Do you really think Daddy will be all right if we go out for a while?"

She felt as if she were betraying her father to withdraw from him even for a little while the sustenance of her loving presence. But the thought of Marian fading, becoming sterile, was intolerable. Jenny's heart seemed to catch and for a moment she could not breathe. She pressed her hand against Merle's vest, and could feel the quick strong beats of his heart. She closed her eyes.

"God, give me a child—dear God, let me have a baby." Jenny's desire was fundamental, imperative, true prayer. The strangest superstition came to her that as long as her father lived she would not bear a child. The tenacity with which she clung to him precluded a new existence. But to-night she would go with Merle. She would hold fast the new friendliness. She would give Merle the complete adoration he had had from her before her father's coming. She would harden her heart just a little against her parent and leave him for an hour or two in the competent hands of Mrs. Sims, and she would be free and young again to-night. She rose and said:

"All right. Let's go."

She got her warm coat, the little boots for her slender feet, her gloves and hat. Merle put on his great coat again. It seemed as if Molly's visit had brought back

to both of them the thought of their old tenderness. Jenny hated to leave her father, but there was nothing else to do. Too often, she saw, she had stayed behind and let Merle go alone. Yet it seemed very hard to go out and close the door against that low distressed sound of his voice.

They walked down Tenth Street to Main, and down Main Street past the darkened stores to the river, and along the parkway to the new pike, and so to the less frequented part of town. Merle strode along, and Jenny tried to keep step with him, laughing a little breathlessly, and finally asking him to walk more slowly, which he did with protestations of regret. She could feel how Merle enjoyed his vitality, which was very great. It surely could not be true, yet it seemed to Jenny that she and Merle had not been alone like this for years. When they went out together in the evening it was always to visit, to be with other people. When they were at home there were often people there to see herself or Merle, or her father; the nurse and the doctor if no one else. Doctor Lunt had come in every evening all this past winter or, if her father was quiet and sleeping, Mrs. Sims came to sit with them by the living-room fire.

Jenny was happy to-night. A new unreasonable freedom welled in her. She said to Merle:

"Sometimes both my mother and father seem strange and unreal to me. If ever we have children, I want them to know that you and I are close and human, and important to them."

"Your people had a bad time," Merle said sympathetically. "But for that matter, my own parents always seemed terribly old, even when I was a little boy. They seem ancient, now."

"Look, Merle," she said. "Look where we've come."

They stopped. The old house stood there, tall and narrow, dark as ever. It seemed to Jenny that there should be a light in that upper square of window. If her mother had waited for her father, she, Jenny, would have been free all these years. Of course, if she had been really wise, instead of practical, as she thought she was being, she would have had her family regardless of circumstances. That was the way to do. They had thought the new burden of her father would be only for a little while, after the burden of the note was paid. There was plenty of time, they told each other. Now she wondered, with a chill sense, if what they considered barrenness was only retribution. Yet, she had asked God. She had tried to do what was right. Only once had she done what was really wrong.

"I wonder if the old bench is still there," she said.

Merle drew her along with him to the steps. Their feet left black wet marks on the new snow. They walked down the porch in a dream. There in the shadow of the vine, thick even in midwinter, was the same old bench.

"Merle," she whispered.

He drew her up to him and kissed her. His face was cold with the snow and winter, but his lips were warm. She felt all her being melting again as it had that first time he had kissed her here that early spring when they were left too much alone. Merle drew her down upon the bench. He seemed, too, to remember everything, or perhaps the impulse of passion was fresh, for he was not much given to remembering.

"Ah, Jenny, I love you," he said to her.

Her cheeks were wet with tears. "I thought you had forgotten," she faltered.

His lips were pressed against her throat. His arms were laid loosely about her, but they tightened suddenly. "No—I haven't forgotten—but more shame to us, Jenny, that we didn't wait. Still, it scares me to recall how nearly we came to missing each other."

She listened in silent complete amazement. Did he think, then, that she would have married him, if it had not been for the disaster that had befallen them that last night they stayed here too long, too unprotected? Her mind was filled with growing wonder at the way his mind worked. His comprehension of their marriage was entirely different from her own. But she did not stir from his close embrace.

They sat a little while, murmuring to each other. They rose with one accord and left the old porch and its shelter and walked again along the street. They came so to their own house. Everything was quiet when they went inside. It might almost have been an empty house that waited them. Merle turned the key in the lock, stooped and caught Jenny in his arms, and carried her up the stairs.

CHAPTER NINE

SECRETS

IAN FOWLER could not get over March Hill. All that nursing, money, science could do for him was not enough. With Jenny's revived absorption in Merle and in the new life she carried secretly, he had no ties to hold him longer. His life, indeed, had already been preserved far beyond its natural limitations. He died in the spring of his fifty-fifth year. Half of his life had been spent at the prison at Michigan City, and in the guest-room of Jenny's house. The other half was a forgotten dream of youth and great physical strength, of high ambitions and intemperate habits, of love and marriage. . . .

He was laid beside Susan Fowler in the Neade family plot. Mrs. Sims went home. The bed was moved upstairs, the down-stairs room made into a den, or office, for Merle who was becoming something of a force in politics. He had men coming and going from the house a great deal of evenings that spring. Jenny, sitting by the fire, reading, would hear him answer the door, hear low husky voices in Merle's office, and then his guests would go out again. They did not care about seeing her. She kept to her own part of the house. Merle would leave his work and come and sit with her.

Jenny found that she could not grieve for her father, although he had grown dear to her. There were not the scalding tears, the wrenching heart-break she had felt when Susan died. His arrival from prison had brought her more sense of sorrow and pain than his passing. She was glad she had been able to give him a little respite,

loving care and nursing, the comforts of home, but she could not for the life of her regret his going. Things seemed normal to her within a few weeks, as though now, at last, after seven years, she and Merle were to begin their married life.

One night Merle said to her: "What do you think of my running for Congress, Jenny?"

"Do they want you to?"

"There's talk of it. Dunny can give it to me, and he's willing enough. I believe I could be elected. I can talk well enough to make the necessary speeches; I've plenty of friends, and my political connections are good. The only thing that worries me is my business. Johnson's a good editor, but he's witless about money. That's why he failed before. He'll buy paper or ink because the salesman says he has a sick mother. I don't want to lose my business. If we take over the paper from Drysdale, in Stone City, I'll have more than ever to look after."

He looked at her questioningly, and then said:

"You couldn't help, could you, Jenny? I've more confidence in you than in any man I could put down there. If I go into this other thing, and stand for the short term of Congress, I'll have to have some one to keep an eye on my affairs here. Two hours a day—if you could get a girl to do the housework, and go down there two hours every morning, it would be enough. I thought you'd miss your father—you might want to do it. Of course, it's just as you feel about it."

"I'd love to. You know I enjoy business, Merle. But I'm afraid that's all past for me. I'm going to have a baby in the fall."

He looked at her in amazement.

"Well, of all things," he said slowly, and then, surprised and hurt, too, "I suppose it's none of my business—but you might have told me such a possibility was in the air. I've wanted this news as much as you. It isn't like you to act like a lady in an old-fashioned novel."

"I'm sorry," Jenny said softly, "but—I've had so many false alarms—I wanted to be sure. And then, the house was full of death. I didn't want to talk about it—I'm superstitious, I suspect, Merle. Forgive me—please——"

She could not tell him how she felt about her father's presence barring a child. She could not tell him her subtlest, scarcely formed thoughts about this, superstitious reasons for her unnatural secrecy.

He rose and went to her and stooped over her, and they kissed each other. His tweeds, his pipe, his shaving soap, all made a blended scent familiar and dear to her.

"You're sure?"

"Of course, goose. Doctor Lunt says October."

"Well, it's pretty wonderful, isn't it, after all these years?"

"It's only been seven—seven years this May since we were married. It was near my twentieth birthday."

"I hope you have a large family of children, ma'am," Merle said, picking her up and sitting down in the chair with Jenny on his knee. "I'll have to pamper you now, I suspect, won't I?" He looked at her with new affection and respect. "This settles the political possibilities for a little while. What we'll need now is money! But perhaps next term I can afford it."

"You aren't disappointed?"

He was grinning widely. "Do I look it?"

Jenny laughed happily. He was like a boy again, merry and teasing. But he became ridiculously serious all in a moment.

"Is the house big enough?" he asked.

Jenny smiled. "A clothes basket will be big enough for the baby, for almost a year, anyhow."

"I bet he'll be all over the house, in a week—his things, and his nurse." He paused and frowned again. "You aren't too old, are you, Jenny?"

"I'm twenty-six, I'll be twenty-seven when the baby is born. That's not old. Many girls are just getting married at my age."

"Jenny, you are a darling. I say, must we keep it a secret?"

"Of course! I don't want advice. I'll get a book and study it."

"That's like you! You can't raise babies by books. Jenny, your father would have loved seeing the baby. I think you should have told him. It worried him that we had no family."

"If it's a girl, Merle, I'm going to name her Susan."

"What? Names picked and everything, and I didn't know it! I've a good mind to put you out in the street! Anyhow, it's going to be a boy."

"Well, in that case——"

"What's the matter with his father's name?"

"Oh, it might do——"

"Lord, Jenny, it's exciting, isn't it? All this time you were moping here, wanting a child, I didn't know it would be like this—such fun!"

Jenny tried to remember that it was only a few short weeks since her father's death, but it was impossible. It was so nice to be alone with Merle. The house was still

and friendly about them, their house, for the first time. Jenny said to her husband:

"We've waited a long time, Merle. Most young people go right to housekeeping and have a baby the first year. But we've got our house now, and our business, and things work out, don't they?"

"They certainly do, sweetheart."

"Merle, how could Molly have given her baby away?"

"Molly's not normal."

"What did you and Doctor Lunt decide about it—her getting it back?"

"She can't get it. It's been legally adopted. The parents don't know it's hers. The mother didn't know for two years that it wasn't her own child. She almost died, I told you. The whole thing has been covered with secrecy. Only a few people know about it."

"Merle, you wouldn't ever do that to me—if I lost a baby you wouldn't bring in another child?"

"Of course not. It's a stupid thing to do. It may have been all right in the old melodramas, but all it breeds is trouble. Besides, it's crooked. Not even the father knew whose baby it was. He had to take the doctor's word about it. I told Molly she would have to make up her mind that the child was gone for good. She'd like to make trouble. I think, if she could be sure, she'd kidnap the little fellow, but she doesn't know."

"How perfectly ghastly it is. When have you seen her?"

"I saw her on the street in Stone City and talked to her not long ago. I meant to tell you, but it was just when your father was dying——"

"It'll get you into trouble some day, doing things for Molly."

"I guess not. She knows I've been square with her."

"Do you suppose it would be a blow to the mother, to find out that her adopted son was Molly's?"

"Well, what would you think?"

"Gracious—people take terrible risks, that adopt children, don't they?"

"They take risks when they have them, too, Jenny. But why not? It's life."

"Poor Molly——"

"The only decent thing she ever did was to give up her baby. And she can't stick to that. She'll make trouble, yet. Nothing will stop her. She's stupid, but she's desperately persistent. One way or another—she'll turn and twist and return to it again."

"It's a wonder she keeps out of jail—blackmailing and running that resort in Stone City——"

"No one has the courage to bring her into court. But she'll run afoul of Dunny some day, and she'll know what a hornet's nest is."

"Is he hard, Merle?"

"Not exactly. Not personally. He wouldn't hurt a fly. When we were boys I used to think he'd never succeed, he was so tender-hearted. He's still that way, in any personal matter. But when it comes to cases, when it comes to the law, Molly would go straight to the penitentiary, and after all, why not? She's a public nuisance."

"But you've been kind to her!"

Merle laughed.

"I adore you when you get that tender tone! You're usually so practical, about everything, always dusting and tidying, and putting the books and papers in a neat pile. What a housewife you have grown to be!"

“And now you are trying to change the subject with flattery. You *have* been kind to Molly. You’re probably the only person who has been disinterestedly decent to her.”

“Well——” He was embarrassed. He fell into silence. Seeing that Jenny was waiting for him to speak, at last he said:

“Even when I was a little fellow I used to think that everybody would be good, if given a fair chance. I know better than that now. People can choose—maybe they can, that is—— But I still have the old feeling—‘There, but for the grace of God, go I.’ I didn’t receive much religious instruction from my father, though plenty of it came my way. But it seems—perhaps it’s superstition, perhaps it’s a kind of insurance against being judged myself—the only thing my father ever really impressed on me was, ‘Judge not, that you be not judged.’ ”

He was silent, and Jenny, too, was quiet, thinking deeply. She knew how rare it was for Merle to think or talk seriously, but she saw, too, that though he did not judge others, neither did he judge himself. He said after a little, his voice quick with indignation:

“When we were little fellows, twelve, perhaps, or thirteen, we were all thrilled and fascinated and scared to death of Molly. Boys more daring than we were, and older boys, boasted of their adventures. Dunny and I—and he was decenter than any boy I ever knew—followed her home from the post-office one evening—almost all the way to her father’s shanty before we grew frightened and ran back home as if the devil were after us! And perhaps he was.” Merle laughed, though he was sorry. “It was a crime. No one knew where she was, or what

she did. Her mother was dead, and her father habitually drunk, or else out with his dogs, 'coon-hunting. She was just a skinny, little, uncared-for, half-wild child, no friends, no chance, no protection. What were the good women of the town thinking of, not to succor her?"

"Most of them were thinking that she was a horrid little creature. They were thinking of their own daughters, not of Nash Winnet's. I doubt if my own mother even knew she existed, or, if she did, what an exciting scandal she was to her own contemporaries."

"I think—your mother knew her, Jenny. Molly told me that your mother never refused to see her. Molly went to visit with Susan now and then. Your mother was governed by her own laws, always, and they did not include being harsh to any one. Your mother gave Molly a copybook, from which she learned to write as well as she does. She never went to school regularly, and not at all, after the eighth grade."

"How strange that seems!"

"Molly's had her revenge on the community," said Merle. "Even though it might not have been deliberate. She's stupid and hard, but she's not as you might think her—not amorous. Just dumb! Oh—anyhow—what's the difference to us, about Molly?"

"None, I suppose—no difference about Molly or her son!"

They talked until very late, and when they locked the doors against the night and went up-stairs together, all alone in their pretty home, Jenny had a little prayer of gratitude in her heart. She felt that God was good, indeed, to answer her prayers, little as she deserved it.

CHAPTER TEN

JENNY'S CHILDREN

JENNY was to remember that summer for years, as a bright, a golden interval; marriage as one might dream of it. They were alone until fall. She worked in her flower garden and kept house to please her own increasingly exact standard, cooked dainty appetizing things for them, sewed on small fine linen garments, and walked with Merle in the long summer evenings. He took it upon himself as his special responsibility to see that she had plenty of fresh air and exercise. She was so kind and gentle with him, and with every one, that her friends became devoted to her without reservation. All the town wished her well.

In July she and Merle went on the first holiday they had enjoyed, in a new car. But the roads were terrible, bumpy and choked with dust, the machine difficult, and Merle left it, after one day's travel, to be driven back to Hilltown, while they went on, by train and boat, to Mackinac Island. There they fished and loafed and swam in the bright water, came back sunburned and deeply contented.

Jenny was wildly happy. Merle, young and handsome, carelessly good-looking, guarded her tenderly. The irritation, the strain and denial, the sacrifice and hard times all vanished like mist, and were forgotten. It was honeymoon.

They were not to be alone again. For Jenny fulfilled Merle's wish for her. She bore a son, in October, a big fine boy, whom they named Merle the Second. A year

from the following spring, when Merle the Second was staggering about, still unsteady on his fat legs, Jenny bore another son whom they named Fowler. When Fowler was two years old she had her third boy, and he was christened Thomas, for Merle's father. This birth was the most difficult she had, and she was slow in recovering her strength. So that the knowledge that she was to have a fourth child, too soon, was something of a blow to her. But she bore it well.

"You were always one to overdo everything," Merle said affectionately. "Now, that you've started having babies——"

Jenny laughed weakly, her eyes filled with tears.

"The house is full of them," she finished, for him.

"Well, we can afford all the help that's needed, but the burden and the responsibility come on you. I want you to take better care of yourself, Jenny. We'd better have Mrs. Sims here all the time."

"She's been here practically all the time for years," said Jenny, half fretfully. "What with Nellie in the kitchen, and a laundress three days a week, and the schoolgirl that comes every afternoon to take Merle and Fowler out for their walk, I feel as though I lived in the court-house. I spent too many years alone with my mother to like all this coming and going. Besides, Mrs. Sims will want to take care of Tom, and I like looking after my own baby."

"It worries me that I have to be in Stone City two nights a week. You must have her here with you those nights, anyhow."

"You drive so fast, Merle—that big car of yours. I lie listening for it, when you're late."

"The road is all graded now, Jenny. They're put-

ting crushed stone on it. It's a fine road. And how can I manage two papers, if I don't travel back and forth? I'd like to give the Stone City paper all my time. You wouldn't want to take the babies and move up there for a year or two, would you?"

"Move away from Hilltown?" she said blankly. "From my house?"

Merle laughed.

"You're like all the other women in this old town," he said. "You think there isn't any other place to live."

"I'm going to have a girl-child, Merle, a little daughter."

Her prophecy was correct. For when Merle, the oldest, was scarcely five, Jenny had her fourth child, a daughter, born in August, an important month for Jenny. The baby was an exquisite little thing, like a tiny perfect doll, and although Jenny was soon herself again, Susan did not thrive as the boys had. It was then that Mrs. Sims came to stay all the time, and she was to be with Jenny for many years. The baby required a great deal of care, and Jenny devoted herself to Susan, leaving the boys much to Mrs. Sims. Susan slept but fitfully at first, and the boys had to be taken out-of-doors, to give her a chance. The down-stairs room, where Jenny's father had lain for nearly five years, and where Merle had laid the foundations of a political career that was to be strong and thriving, was now a play-room, with a gate across the door. Merle could undo the gate, but it still confined Fowler and Tom. The boys fought a great deal, a proceeding which seemed unnecessary to Merle and Jenny, who had each been reared alone.

All of the boys had broad comely faces which Jenny

and her mother, her grandfather and great-grandfather had identified in the county as "Neade." Merle the Second (a phrase which mystified the child a great deal, as he knew himself to be the first, the oldest of the children) had blue eyes, and hair much like his father's, which was brown and wavy. Fowler and Tom were dark beautiful children, straight and sturdy, loud in their own importance. But the little girl favored none of them, being slender and tall, small-boned, very fair, with a thin transparent skin. She was quiet, too, a dainty little lady. She looked at her brothers unmoved from her throne in the crib. They were all eager for her favor. They brought their most precious possessions to her, and she took their favors in her soft baby hand, looked at the giver and the gift with equal composure and indifference. Her father adored her.

"Where did you come from, miss?" he would say, lifting her, trying to win some response from her, while Jenny and the boys watched eagerly.

She would smile a little faintly and then grow sober again. Jenny, watching her, found in her detachment some uncanny resemblance to the child's grandmother and namesake, Susan Fowler, and the thought roused swift fear in her heart. With great resolve she began to woo and win the baby to affection, to response, to the bonds and burdens of love. Almost insensibly, Susan responded to Jenny's devotion and began to grow stronger, more lively and affectionate.

During the five years that Jenny was so busy with her young family, several things of importance happened in the town that had their effect, directly, or indirectly, on Jenny's life. One of these was the definite return of Molly Clarke from Stone City. After several

unsuccessful attempts to buy property in Hilltown, Molly succeeded in buying, from the mortgagee, Jenny's old home. It was an accomplished fact for weeks before any one in town knew about it. Jenny went by there one day and found men painting the house. The shutters had been torn away. Workmen were inside and outside of it, and the side yard, under the old tree, was being mowed. Jenny questioned the men, one of whom had worked for her, but they did not know the new owner. A real-estate agent had employed them.

Within a few weeks the house had been made more charming than any one would have thought possible. The narrow front porch, so near the street, was torn away, the front door taken out, and wide paned-glass windows set in the front wall. A driveway led back under a new porte-cochère to the dining-room, where steps entered the house. There was a veranda and a screened sleeping porch above it, built on the side of the yard where the great tree protected it. A garage built for two cars, was made from the ancient sheds, wash-room, coal-shed, wood-shed, the usual string of out-buildings behind an old small-town house.

Furniture was moved in, and curtains were hung. Still no one knew who the new tenant was to be. And then Molly arrived, driving a small smart electric—the first to be seen on the streets of Hilltown. She put the car in the garage, took from her enormous hand-bag a bunch of keys, unlocked the door and entered the house.

There was an immediate, a terrific uproar. Scandalized neighbors did their best to oust her, carrying their complaints into court. But Judge Lattimer dismissed them, ruling that unless it could be irrefutably proved that Molly was using the house for immoral purposes

she should be left undisturbed. And, indeed, her life there was quiet enough. No one came near her. She went away in her car, and stayed sometimes for days at a time, but while she was in Hilltown, she received no visitors. An old colored woman, famed for her discretion, "did" for Molly.

Jenny was oddly heart-sick about it. Merle told her that Molly owned a saloon in Stone City and another in the capital, from which she derived substantial revenue, that she was reputed to have changed her old way of life, although she was inevitably connected with vice in one form and another. Hilltown was already under local option, drier than it would ever be again. People wondered why Molly clung to the town, when she was less well known, and had a better chance to become respectable, elsewhere. But Merle and Jenny knew.

"Molly has an instinct for money, and no scruples to deter her," Merle said, and his face darkened. "I wonder what she has in her mind now—something about her son. Well, I'm through with her! She can get some other numskull to be at her beck and call. It was a darned ungrateful thing for her to do—buy Mother Fowler's house, and move into it!"

A few weeks before Fowler was born Dunny's young wife Edythe died in childbirth. The baby girl for whom she had sacrificed her own life, was saved, and Dunny went on alone in the house he had inherited. His mother was gone from him now. He had a trained nurse for the baby and the same old colored woman who had worked for his mother, to cook and clean, with her husband to take care of the yard and the car.

That summer Dunny fell into the habit of coming to

see Jenny and her two boys. He was interested in her ways with her children. He saw that Fowler, though younger than his baby, Kathleen, flourished far beyond anything his little daughter could accomplish. He wanted to know every detail of the care Jenny gave her children. He consulted with her and with Mrs. Sims about his nurse's methods and procedure. He called them once in the night, when the baby was ill, and Merle, a little impatient, took Jenny to Kent's, and stayed there with her until morning.

The doctor and the nurse were a long time working over the child. She had been premature, and the valves of the heart seemed improperly closed, and she had a way of swooning. Jenny, holding the baby for the nurse, seeing the blue veins in her temples, thought of her own fat boys with a failing heart. She could not believe that Dunny would keep this little daughter, this Kathleen Kent, on whom he had fastened his affections.

Her fears proved prophetic. The baby dragged out the weary months of winter, scarcely learning even to sit up, not smiling or crowing, lying listless, or crying fretfully, while Fowler thrived and grew, was weaned and learned to drink from a cup, pulled himself up in his bed and, by holding on to chairs, walked laboriously about the living-room floor and shouted and crowed with the sheer joy of being alive. Before her first birthday Dunny's baby gave up the unequal struggle and slipped away from them. Jenny's heart was broken with pity for Dunny, with very shame for her own offensively healthy babies. It seemed to her one of the saddest things she had known. Dunny stood all alone. His very temperament precluded the making of intimate friends, though every one who knew him liked and

trusted him. His father and mother were gone, and now—his wife and child.

Dunny came in to see her one evening when Merle was in Stone City about ten days after the burial of his little daughter. He was haggard yet still composed, still precise and even in speech and appearance. Much speaking before juries had brought to him a clearness and correctness of enunciation, a very beauty of speech that might have been the equipment of an actor of culture and ability. That he was suffering, that he was distraught showed only in his tired burning eyes, in his general air of sleeplessness, of being taut and hard-controlled. He had left his car at home, and walked through the rainy streets, and the soles of his shoes were wet.

They talked quietly a little while. Jenny restrained her own emotion out of respect to his manner. Nellie was putting the two boys to bed, and Jenny went to the foot of the stairs, once, to speak to young Merle, to command him to obey the maid. In a little while there came a great shout of laughter from the baby, who was always noisy.

Dunny sat listening. He lifted his eyes and looked at Jenny when she came back to him.

"Everything!" he said vehemently. "I lost everything—when I lost you!"

She started and the burning color ran up into her cheeks. It was the first time Dunny had shown by so much as a glance that she had ever been more than a friend, or a friend's wife, to him. Her glance was imploring, his inflexible.

"Don't think I blame you, Jenny," he said quietly. "You were not for me. You never loved me. It was in myself—some fault in me, that I was to lose the most

important thing of all. I thought I could make things right. I loved Edythe dearly, but it wasn't like that first youthful love. There were so many other elements, affection, pride, a response to her love, the need! It is my destiny, that everything goes out of my hands. Don't misunderstand, Jenny—if I could have had her, I would have loved her dearly, always. But if I could have had you——”

Jenny was shaken.

“I was never good enough for you, Dunny,” she said in a low voice. “You lost little enough, when you lost me.”

“When you were a girl,” he said, scarcely hearing her, following his own thought, “you were thin and awkward; unhappy and forlorn; neglected, worshiping Marian, worshiping Merle—proud of me. I could feel it in you even then, how you tried to hold up your head, and reminded yourself of your grandfather's, of your mother's family, the Neades. You always protected your mother from criticism and the discerning eyes of other people, and looked at her with unsatisfied longing, spoke of her ‘intelligence.’ I loved you then—and always. It seems queer now, that a boy could have had so much understanding. Your mother seemed to me a terrible woman, though I suppose she could not help her character, or her fate any more than I, or others. And when she went away and left her burden on you, I felt that surely God would curse her down the years.”

Jenny looked at him with wide frightened eyes.

“Dunny!” she whispered.

He moved impatiently.

“Of course I knew!” he said. “How could I help it? I was in love with you. I knew that you knew, too, that

you understood. Whether any one else suspected is beyond me. She had already destroyed herself before that last act of self-destruction. She pictured your father coming back to her young, vital—as he went away. And she saw herself, saw, for the first time, what she had become, and knew that she could never change, that it was all over for her. And she failed you, as she always did!”

Jenny sat looking at him with wide eyes. It seemed her own voice, her own heart speaking to her. No one understood her life—dared to understand her—like this!

“Ah, Jenny,” he went on in his low beautiful voice, “it was small kindness I did you when I brought that old man back upon you—the sick, morbid, empty shell of a man to come in on you when you were a young wife and needed all your time for Merle and your own affairs. It was like all that I have done for every one—it turned wrong on my hands. I watched you—I knew what you did. And Merle so careless, always, going striding along, never aware of half that happened—— You haven’t had it easy, Jenny.”

“I have had it far better than I deserve,” she answered him. She could not bear what he was showing her—his own belief that his touch was black magic—his self-distrust. “I was never a good girl. I betrayed you—before we were married—while we were engaged to you and to Marian—I promised to be true to you always—but Merle and I—ah, Dunny, forgive me——”

“Why do you tell me this now?” he said harshly. “What is there for me in such knowledge—though”—his voice fell again—“I always feared it. He could not have won you from me——”

“Merle was no more to blame than I—I don’t know

why I tell you," she was listless, "unless it is because I have always wanted to tell you. You can see that other people have things to bear—that I live always in fear——"

"He could never have had you, if he had not seduced you," he said with some passion, but then he shook his head and his eyes and voice were very gentle. "That would never have been possible, between you and me, Jenny." They sat in silence a little while, and he said, with some bitterness, "But I betrayed no one."

He got up from his chair and went to stand before the fire, a slim immaculate figure of a man, facing her, trying to understand, his voice low and wondering. "I never gave a promise in my life, and broke it, that I know. Perhaps I've done wrongs I was unaware of. My wife is gone, and my little daughter—my Kathleen—and I am all alone. And you and Merle have everything—money, love, children."

Jenny pressed her hands together. The tears ran unheeded down her white cheeks.

"I can not change that," she said, so humbly that he went to her and stooped and kissed her.

He put his hand beneath her chin and lifted her face and smiled down at her.

"Now I have made you unhappy. I wouldn't have anything changed for you, Jenny. Keep and hold it all—nothing is too good for you. No one is gladder than I to see you with your splendid babies, here in your pretty home. You've worked for it. If Merle becomes a rich and famous man, he has you to thank for it. You must forgive me for to-night. I have been sentimental and weak—talking like a woman! I do get lonely." He made a small sound, half chuckle, half sigh,

patted her shoulder and drew away from her. "There is no person in Hilltown more lonely than I—unless it is Molly."

"You must come to us more," she said, smiling at him uncertainly.

"I will," he said, "but not often. This is certainly a town made of glass houses. I wouldn't dare come often—no matter how innocently."

"Merle and I wouldn't care," she said staunchly, and then, more warily, "You have other friends, too—old friends, who would be glad to share companionship with you."

His smile was genuinely amused. He seemed more cheerful, more like his usual self.

"You are an innocent, Jenny," he said. "You mean Marian, don't you? The obvious romance. What would there be for Marian and me? She always resented me a little, that I wasn't one of her admirers. I never felt drawn to her. And now—she has become confused—her charm is diminished—for the present anyhow."

"Dunny, don't say such things—it isn't like you."

He looked down at her in surprise.

"It wasn't your fault, Jenny. It was on the books for her. Sooner or later——"

"It was I who did it," she said unsteadily. "I—when I—when Merle and I——"

"But that is very egotistical of you," he said slowly. "Although I understand how you feel. But none of us has such powers, surely. You must not entertain morbid thoughts, Jenny. They hurt too much. Promise me that you will not think that way, any more." His voice was a little peremptory.

Jenny sensed in him a great reserve of power. She

was silent, and Dunny said in a more ordinary tone:

"I must go. It has done me good to see you, and I don't want you to take my burdens on yourself, or let this visit affect you. Just feel that you have been generous and kind to me, Jenny. You were always closer to me than any one. I always felt that we could talk the same language. And I mean what I say, that you must give up this morbid responsibility about Marian. You wouldn't really change things, would you?"

"No," she said. "Nothing."

"You see——?"

In the year that Jenny carried Tom, Merle stood for Congress on the party ticket and was defeated by so small a margin, when defeat was on the books, that he was obviously the next candidate. His political life seemed less real to Jenny than his business affairs, his two papers, his investments and savings. He took time to go to the State Legislature the next summer, and strengthened all his political affiliations. His connections in Stone City were excellent now. Dunny's consistent aid and loyalty were of great use to him. Dunny felt in himself no political aspirations, but he was in position to know what things Merle should and should not do, what people he should align himself with, and whom to avoid. The building up of their plans brought them together a great deal, and Dunny was more often at the house, as the years passed, but he and Jenny never talked intimately again. Jenny could see that Dunny was far more subtle than Merle. Merle took their friendship at its face value, without reserves. He was fond of Dunny. The past was meaningless to him. The present was tremendously absorbing, the future auspi-

cious. Jenny saw that Dunny was compelled, by his own nature, to leave no stone unturned that would further Merle's cause, add to his greatness and honor. A deep and powerful man Dunny—but not dangerous. Merle went ahead cheerfully and boldly. He was filling out now, in his middle thirties, a big handsome man, ruddy and cheerful and brimming with self-confidence, a family man, a husband and father, shrewd in business, able to draw followers.

When Susan was a year old (Jenny dated all her life, at this time, by her babies) and standing alone, taking a step or two, like a grave young drunkard before she sat, astonished, on the soft rug, Molly Clarke came to the house one summer evening at dusk. Jenny, called to the door by the maid, was more impatient with Molly than she had been once before.

"I can't receive you, Molly," she said in her low voice. "I don't believe Merle can see you."

Molly stood on the porch a moment, and then asked, in her thin tones:

"It's because of my buying your mother's house?"

Suddenly Jenny was ashamed. Neither she nor Merle had thought it worth while to redeem the house. She had been glad to leave it. She had wished never to live in it again. Molly had to have a place. She had improved and beautified the property. Even her neighbors had ceased to murmur against her.

"No," she said, "I think you have made the house very pretty, Molly. I'm glad to see it so well cared for. Only Merle says he can do nothing more for you."

"You have four babies," said Molly stonily. "I want to know where my one baby is. I've changed my whole life so I could have him."

"Are you sure Merle knows? I don't."

"Merle knows. And Doctor Lunt is dead. I've a pretty good idea myself. I've done what's right, for years, now. There's not been a man in my house since I bought it. I can do well for my son—give him a fine education. He'd want his mother, if he knew."

"He's thirteen years old now, Molly. You'd be a stranger to him."

"I see him—nearly every day," she said, and then, her voice shaken—it was the only time Jenny was to hear a tremor in that thin metallic voice—"but I can't be sure. I could stand anything, just to know——"

"I'll tell Merle you were here," Jenny promised. It was impossible not to pity Molly.

She turned away from the door without so much as a word of farewell, and when she had reached the walk, Jenny closed the door silently, feeling at a disadvantage. It irked her to have Molly coming, prancing to the door, asking for Merle as though she had a claim on him. Yet Jenny disliked the need to be inhospitable, discourteous. Her mood was so torn between disgust and pity that she tried to put it all out of her mind at once.

The campaign passed swiftly. Merle had a fine offer for his Stone City paper, but he postponed the deal until after election, giving the prospective buyers an option for the interval. If he were elected he intended to let the Stone City paper go—to cash in on it. He had long ago purchased Johnson's rights in it. The *Hilltown Journal* was now a fine property, with a subscription list that blanketed the county. Johnson had developed as an editor, with more space and more money, and freedom from financial cares. There was a youngster who wrote the sport news and did a great many of the chores

Merle had taken on at first. The paper subscribed to the A. P., bought reprints of novels, and the conventional funny strips. They ran from eight to twelve pages daily, a size that Merle, in his wildest moments, would not have believed possible when he and Jenny bought a half interest in the single-sheet *Hilltown Journal* for a few thousand dollars.

There was no one obvious reason for the paper's unusual prosperity, beyond Merle's gift for making people like him, coupled with a surprisingly shrewd sense of money and financial management. The steady, week-in-week-out increase in inches of advertising, the long-time space contracts, the connections with good agencies, the maintenance at low cost, these were what made the paper and what made the Stone City paper—another Drysdale failure with which Merle succeeded—into a finer property than the *Hilltown Journal*, because it was located in a larger city. And indeed, as Dunny sometimes pointed out to Merle, the seeds of their financial success had been fertile, sown by himself and Jenny in sacrifice, those first lean years of marriage.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A CALL FROM MOLLY

JENNY sat waiting for Merle to come from a political meeting one evening in September, two weeks before the fall elections. He was speaking somewhere every night, and in the great pressure of his affairs, she did not see him so much as usual. Women had not yet begun to go about with candidate husbands and help campaign. Jenny had gone several times, to hear him speak, but no one expected her to lay aside her home duties because he was becoming more powerful and promising every year, as a rising political figure. Merle was running on an advanced ticket. He was for a suffrage amendment, he was already a "dry," and stood for a high tariff. There was still talk, in 1912, of a full dinner pail, as no one knew that the dinner pail would become a relic, and employees eat in sanitary cafeterias, company owned, within a dozen years. There was in Merle an inherited ability for oratory. In his father's home he had absorbed the vocabulary of public speech, the ringing words, the somewhat Biblical flair or flavor of utterance. He had never read or studied much, but he knew the political situation, its needs and desires completely. Just as, in business, his ability to make people like him had been coupled with an oddly strong sense of money, so now his charm was reenforced with great practical judgment. He was looked upon as a forward thinking young man, a progressive, an idealist. But Jenny knew that Merle was not the man to espouse a losing cause.

As she sewed, she sat thinking about him. It seemed

to her that he remained absolutely unchanged, year after year. It had not been because he was modern, that he had been willing for her to work two years, willing for her to handle the family accounts, to have her own way. It was rather that he was unhampered by ideals or traditions, old or new. He was essentially practical. The fresh, laughing, care-free boy was still dominant in him. He was perhaps less idealistic than he had been, though she could see now that he had never been so much an idealist as she had thought him. He had been kind. That was the most of it. Although he had spoken of his honor, when he talked to her, that day, of marriage, it had been his wish that ruled him. His mind worked comfortably. The sight of the steadily fading, ineffective figure of Marian Caruthers presented to Jenny a continual reproach, so that she felt at times as though she herself sat in Marian's place, basked in her luxuries, nursed her children, lived her life. But Merle was only grateful that he and Jenny had found each other. He thought of Marian as a woman from whom he had miraculously escaped. And so, in politics he accepted all that Jenny and Dunny and others did to make his way easy as a sort of right. He understood completely the wrongs and the grafts of his party but was not repelled. For himself, he intended to keep his hands clean. It paid. He would build up the roads of his county, the influence and power of his party, as Pericles built Athens, without adding to his private income. He would be absolutely uninterested in a bribe, Jenny honestly believed. His income was sufficient. He knew how to make money. But the proffering of a bribe would not offend him at all. He would refuse it, and go ahead dealing and counseling with those who had offered it, trying, even, to

work out some other way by which they might attain their desires, if they were not incompatible with the good of the party.

For Merle had set his aspirations high, this time. So much had he and Jenny accomplished, so far had they come in the twelve years of their marriage, that Merle now began to think of himself, soberly, as belonging in a high place. By the time he was forty, he confided to Jenny, he would be governor of the state. At fifty he would be a leader in Congress. After that——

“Well, why not?” she thought.

Some one had to fill the high offices. He had great personal charm, and he had a good mind. He was a business man, but business men were coming forward in politics. He was strong, with abounding vitality—an absolute essential to political success. He was warm and friendly, and he had a canny wife. Jenny was careful of every penny, yet they lived in the greatest comfort. She was never idle. The little embroidered suits the boys wore were always in her hands. Susan’s fine organdie bonnets, the sheer frilly dresses, were all of Jenny’s making. She looked well to the ways of her household. Every garment that came back from the laundry was carefully examined, mended and put away. She watched the supplies, the soaps and the bread box. She was never niggardly, yet everything was handled circumspectly. It had been a great victory for her, and one of which she was entirely unaware, that, reared as she had been, she had developed, by sheer wanting, into such a fine manager. She never spent all that Merle gave her, however much or little it was. She was Hoosier clear through, saving and money-wise. She had never asked Merle for an allowance, since it had been his way

to give her everything since they were first married. There was little talk and no strife about money between them. Merle was generous and trusted in her good sense, as he had plenty of reason to do. He was anxious for his family to have everything. He did not remember, with words, perhaps, what Jenny had done to help them get started, but his attitude toward her about money was much governed by their first sharing of financial responsibility.

Jenny was thinking of these things, or rather, thoughts of Merle were drifting through her mind, as she sat sewing buttons on the endless small suits of little boys' underwear, worn and patched, mended and handed down. There was a box of bone buttons on the arm of her chair. She had almost finished the last bit of mending when she heard Merle's car in the driveway, with the old familiar rush of gratitude for his safe return. He came in through the kitchen from the garage. She left a light on the back porch for him, always. He bolted the door and switched off the light and came into the dining-room, and Jenny saw at once, looking up to greet him, that he was angry, through and through.

Jenny sat still, drawing into her own soul a little. He was almost never out of temper, and he had never been angry with her.

He said, directly, in a low voice, so as not to be heard except by her:

"Was Molly here to see me recently?"

"Oh, Merle, I forgot to tell you. It was weeks ago. You said you didn't want to see her again!"

"Look at this!"

It was a letter written on the finest linen bond, the thin lines bespeaking a fine, possibly a gold, pen. It

brought back to Jenny the impact of that hour which had been the beginning of their own romance, a letter from Molly in Merle's troubled possession. She took the letter and looked at it. The character and general aspect were the same, only that the letter showed more assurance. It read:

Dear Mr. Ferguson: I was very disappointed that you did not send me the fifteen thousand dollars owing to me, in accordance with our agreement. I thought you would understand the purpose of my visit to your house last month. I have now fulfilled my part of the contract between us, and I shall expect you to fulfill yours. I can not afford to lose this money, and shall take steps to prevent such a loss.

Very respectfully,
Molly Winnet Clarke.

Jenny looked up, bewildered.

"What does she mean? What contract?" she asked.

Merle's face was hard as stone.

"Don't you understand?" he said impatiently. "It's blackmail!"

"Blackmail?" Jenny's voice was a whisper. She felt ill. "But how can she blackmail you! There isn't anything—how does she dare do this?"

"I don't know." His voice sounded particularly savage because it was low, suppressed. "She's got something, you may be sure. Even if she hadn't a thing—right now, before the election—how can I prove it? Every one will believe her. It's because she thinks I'm preventing her from getting her baby. That is how her mind works. It isn't money she wants from me."

They were silent. Merle took off his coat and flung it down into a chair. He began to fold back the cuffs

of his white shirt-sleeves, a fighting gesture, instinctive, strong. He walked about the room.

Jenny said, at last: "Of course, Merle, she can't blackmail you by threatening me. I wouldn't believe anything she said—anything! No matter what it was, no matter what witnesses or documents she had—I wouldn't believe her."

"Of course not!" he exclaimed irritably.

"But isn't that usually the way—with such creatures—to threaten a man by his wife? What else can she do?"

"She can ruin me politically."

"I don't believe she can! Defy her! Let her try it."

"Certainly I shall not pay her fifteen thousand dollars—or fifteen cents! Once I gave her any sum, she'd bleed me."

"Why don't you let Dunny look after it? Why don't you give it all to him? You've said, yourself, how stern he is. And blackmail is a felony, with a heavy punishment. And Dunny's deputy prosecutor."

"I can't go to him."

"Why not?"

"It's all changed now."

"But what do you mean? Dunny would do as much for you as he ever would."

"But I can't ask him. It's Judge Lattimer's son—James—Edythe's brother. It's Dunny's wife's family that have Molly's son. Don't you understand?"

"Oh!" Jenny felt a great impatience. "How could they have done such a thing!" she demanded. She thought of the boy at once. Why, he looked like Judge Lattimer, the same fine features, the same black eyes. "It's a mistake," she said.

Merle laughed ruefully.

"No," he told her, "it isn't a mistake. Mrs. Lattimer was determined to have another child. They wanted a son. They were married late in life, and Edythe was born to them, and when she was twelve, Mrs. Lattimer's wish to have another child was to be gratified. She almost lost her life, and the child was still-born. Oh, it's not such an uncommon thing—substitution. It was a case of pulling her through. They didn't think she could ever bear the disappointment, if she emerged from unconsciousness long enough to learn that her baby was dead. And Doctor Lunt knew that Molly was lying in the hospital at the University with a two-day-old infant. I went with him, and we got the baby. That was just a little while after I showed you that letter. I never spoke about it again to any one. In fact, I didn't think much about it. Molly asked me to do her a favor, and I did. My father knew all kinds of things about all kinds of people. A preacher's family learns to keep still, to forget. Molly signed the necessary papers for Doctor Lunt. She relinquished the child completely. Afterward, when James was two or three years old, the judge told his wife that the baby was adopted. But even then, they didn't know whose child it was. The name Clarke is common enough, and Molly was away from here. Doctor Lunt told them that the child was legitimate, that he had brought it, with the mother's consent, from the University Hospital, that they should ask no questions. He told them it was born normally, of a healthy mother. He's a fine boy. They worship him. I can't drag Dunny into it. No one knows, now, but you and me, and the judge and his wife. Her sister who nursed her at the time, has been dead for several years. But you see, Molly has reasoned it out, that

that's her baby. She wants me to tell her, though. She'll stop at nothing—to be sure."

He walked helplessly about, furious and wounded.

"You saw the letter she wrote to me. She didn't know what she could do with a baby—with no husband, and no way to earn her living. It didn't occur to her to use the money she had in the bank. She thought she had done well to bear a son. Even I could see her difficulties. She had gone back to her old ways that she had before she married. Well, it's the end of my political career."

"Not yet, Merle. Not so fast."

"It isn't bluff. I tell you, I know her. She's stupid, but she knows how to get money, how to get her own ends. Her husband taught her well. It's a fine art, blackmailing!"

"Sh—Mrs. Sims will hear you. Let's talk to her, Merle. Let's find out what it is she's getting at."

"I'll not go down there——"

Jenny went to the telephone and looked up Molly's number in the book, and called her. When she heard Molly's thin voice, she said at once:

"This is Jenny Ferguson."

"Oh——" Was there a little let-down? Or surprise?

"I want you to come over here, Molly."

"I can't come now."

"Oh, yes you can," said Jenny cheerfully. "And don't come in your car, please."

There was a moment's silence.

"Why do you want me to come there? Why don't you come here?"

But Jenny would not parley with her. Jenny had become a person of authority.

"Either you come here, Molly, or we won't see you at all."

There was a hesitation, and then:

"I'll come in half an hour."

Jenny hung up the telephone and went up-stairs.

"Mrs. Sims—I wonder if you wouldn't like to go home for the night? Merle is expecting some political callers here."

"I want to see the show, anyhow. I'll telephone Nora to meet me. Thank you, Jenny."

She was gone in a few moments. Jenny went back to Nellie's bedroom.

"I'll answer the door-bell, Nellie. You can go out, if you like."

"Yes, Mrs. Ferguson. There's a swell show. I'll be in time for the second running."

They were alone. Jenny said: "You must keep your temper, Merle. It doesn't matter at all what you think or how you feel. The main business is to win."

"I'll leave it to you, then," he said, and they sat in silence, waiting.

Precisely half an hour passed when there came a timid knock at the door. Jenny went and opened for Molly herself. A harvest moon flooded the world outside.

"Come in, Molly."

Molly came into the living-room, alone, guarded and silent. She looked all around.

"There's no one here but Merle and me," said Jenny, smiling a little, and there throbbed in her a deep distaste for the business in hand. She had never disliked Molly as she did at this moment.

Merle said: "Sit down, Molly. I showed your letter to Jenny. We don't understand it."

Molly smiled. She was ill, Jenny thought. She was thin to emaciation. Her face was as small as Jenny's narrow palm.

"It's about the house," said Molly. "You made a bargain with me, that if I would come back here, and fix the house up, you would repay me for my expenditure, though you didn't want to do it then. You wanted me here where you could come to see me, and you have never returned the money I laid out on the property. Fifteen thousand dollars, I spent, buying it and remodeling it and getting new furniture."

Jenny and Merle looked at each other. Jenny said:

"What is it you *really* want, Molly? You know, of course, that this is nonsense, about the house. What is your idea? Do you think Merle will pay you any sum of money just because you ask for it?"

"A bargain is a bargain," said Molly primly.

"I'm surprised to hear you say that," began Merle, but Jenny said:

"I think I understand what the situation is, Molly. But you are mistaken if you think Merle can help you. He can do nothing for you."

"Of course," said Molly, "in place of the money Merle owes me, I would consider the information he can give me. I want to know just one thing. Merle knows it."

"Are you sure he does, Molly?"

"Merle came there to the hospital and got my baby. His baby. I can prove that. The nurses there saw him. They gave it to him. I want him to tell me what he did with our son."

"Of course, Molly, you can't make any one believe that was Merle's child. I knew all about it, then!"

"Did you? Merle was engaged to Marian then. Why

did he come to the hospital, if he wasn't concerned?" demanded Molly triumphantly.

Merle opened his mouth, looked at Jenny and closed it tightly again. The blood showed in congested spots on his neck.

"Because you asked him to, Molly. He was the only one to befriend you. Of course, he should have ignored your letter, refused your appeal."

Molly was not to be cajoled. The dreadful words came delicately in her thin emotionless voice.

"I don't care what happens to any one," she said, "if I can have my boy. It was the only good thing that ever happened to me, and I was too young and silly to know it. I don't care for any or all of you put together, or who befriended or who hated me. If Merle refuses, I can ruin him, and I'll do it!"

"Not only Merle, Molly—others, too."

"I don't care."

"But what if you don't succeed? What if you go ahead, and tell a lot of lies about Merle, which no one will believe, and it causes trouble for Merle, and he is not elected? What of that? Still you won't know what you want to know, for understand us, Molly, we do not intend to be blackmailed. Merle has the letter you have written to him, and your old letter—the first one. When he is through with you you will be in prison! The ruination will work both ways. There is a limit to what people will stand from you."

"They aren't all lies," said Molly.

Jenny made a little deprecating gesture.

"You must prove your statements. There must be more than your word."

"I can prove them," said Molly. "Not the facts I

intend to use, perhaps, but the others which will prevent you from denying what I say.”

“Suppose you tell us how you intend to do that?”

“I will not tell you that until the time comes, Jenny. I wasn’t born yesterday. For many years I have found it my only defense to know what other people were doing—to spy upon them, if you like that better. I know a great deal that would surprise you. Three things, about yourself and Merle, I will tell you, if not how I can prove them. One, that Merle himself came to the hospital and took my baby away for Doctor Lunt. That is a fact. Let the people here make their own conclusions. The second thing I can prove is that Susan Fowler did not die a natural death. A small dose of morphine brought on the heart attack that killed her. I got the morphine for her, though I wouldn’t have done it, if I had known how frail she was.”

“Molly——”

“Yes,” inflexibly. “And I can prove that you were no innocent girl when Merle married you—you who are too fine to receive me!”

“Hush!” said Merle, so sternly that for a moment Molly faltered. But she drew herself together. She was fighting in the way she knew how to fight. It all came down to one thing—she didn’t care.

“Yes,” she said, again, “night after night—after other people were in bed, Merle went to you at the time most Hilltown boys leave their girls, and stayed until after midnight, often—in silence and secrecy. That is a game I have played myself—hiding and waiting—making love in the dark.”

Jenny had risen, and she stepped between Merle and Molly instinctively. Molly rose, too. Merle, choking,

began to say something, but Jenny cut across the thick words.

“Go now—please.”

Molly went, with no break in the artificial elaborateness of her manner. She turned at the door, her thin empty face without expression, her sloe-black eyes half closed and veiled. She said politely:

“Until to-morrow then, good-by.”

She went out and closed the door softly. Jenny felt as if she would die. In this moment—here and now—if Death would seize her! She could feel Merle shaking with anger. She turned away from him, filled with aversion, and went to the window and stood there, looking out through the sheer curtain at Molly, walking steadily, with mincing steps, down the avenue, away from them. Jenny felt her vitality ebbing and falling, felt the pincers closing about her heart. The words were branded on her soul—“a game I have played, myself—making love in the dark.” She and Molly. Jenny and Molly, playing the same game—the same methods—the same, the same, the same!

Merle gave a kind of groan and threw out his arms with a gesture of despair.

“What can you do with that kind of cattle?” he said harshly. “There’s gratitude for you! Well, Jenny—she has us on the hip!”

“Merle!” she turned to him with a little anguished cry. “You aren’t going to give in to her!”

He stood frowning. After a moment he lifted his head, which had fallen forward, and he and Jenny looked at each other. Merle’s face worked. His lower lip protruded and trembled, as Fowler’s did at times.

“Jenny,” he implored, “darling—don’t look like that.

Don't let what she said touch you. It's nothing but words. The wind blowing——”

But Jenny could endure no more. Her control was broken. She flung out one hand, and the box of buttons was knocked to the floor, its contents rolling everywhere, but neither of them knew it. She burst into bitter weeping. She did not cover her face but stood and looked at her husband with reckless acceptance.

“It's true,” she said wildly. “Everything that she said is true—except that the baby belonged to you. It's true that Mother killed herself. I knew it, though I didn't know how. And it's true that you and I—that Molly and I—that I was a bad girl! I knew it then. I know it now. Bad—worse than Molly. She takes only money, but I took life and love and everything from my friend—for myself. I've known for years that this was coming. Let it fall, now, and let the thing be over with. Don't—you're hurting me, Merle.”

But Merle held her close—his firm bony hand was over her mouth. He was panting a little as she strained against him, and then he stood sorrowfully, and held her while she wept.

“Jenny,” he said, “you've never reproached me with what I did to you. I—I had forgotten it! We've been married so long—all these babies, the house and the paper, and the town. What difference did a day or two make—or a few words by a preacher, when we loved each other? It's all just a part of life. It's not important to me—never was. Can't you forget it, too? I've seen, once or twice, how you tortured yourself about Marian. You didn't rob her, or me, any more than I robbed you. I swear to you, Jenny—I swear on my honor, that you were the first and the last woman ever

I possessed. We've been faithful to each other, you and I, Jenny. That's all that counts. We've loved each other. Haven't you loved me, Jenny?"

"Always," she said faintly, and he stroked her cheek.

"And we won't think that way—Jenny?"

She could not answer but drew away from him and put her hands up to the disorder of her hair, and steadied herself.

"What can we do about Molly, Merle?"

They sat down on the deep couch together. Merle's hands fell between his knees, and he sat looking at the rug, biting his lips, his head fallen forward, his shoulders hunched. Jenny leaned back, her hands in her lap, her eyes closed, exhausted. He had forgotten all about it! He took his life each day. He was considered an honorable man, and he had forgotten all about those secret trysts, that spring so long ago, had forgotten all about Marian and Dunny! Now she saw for the first time, fully, that if he had not been diverted from Marian that he would have lived his life out comfortably, married to her, faithful to her, going ahead, day after day, forgetting Jenny. It was possible for him to consider Dunny his best friend, without prick of conscience. Merle had no idea what Dunny's feelings might be, but took it for granted that they were identical with his own. The conversation Jenny and Dunny had had, after Kathleen Kent died, would have astonished Merle, and made him impatient, nothing more. She saw, in amazement, that she was nearer to Dunny, spiritually, than to Merle or any one else. Her anguish, her remorse, were comprehensible to Dunny, even when he told her not to think that way. But Merle only shut his eyes and went ahead. He would decide now what to do, and

he would do it and forget it. If it succeeded, whatever plan his adroit mind was conceiving, it would be the end of the matter for him, and Molly's venomous words would never come to him again, to visit him, in the silence of sleepless nights.

A great longing came to her to accept her shame publicly. Let the town know just what she had done, and what she was. Let the women talk, and the old men look at her sidewise. It would be a relief—to have the debt paid.

"There is probably one long chance to take," said Merle; "either we must face it out, and count on the fact that no one will believe her, or we must go to Judge Lattimer and consult with him."

"Merle—you won't forget the boy—what it would mean to him to be sent back to Molly. Even to know that he's hers!"

"I'm afraid there are other things to consider before that."

"She couldn't get him, could she, Merle?"

"I don't believe so—not without a trial."

"We can't talk to Dunny or the judge without telling them the nature of her threats against us, and the fact that we fear her."

They were silent again. After a long time Merle sighed. Jenny's heart ached with the thought of his suffering. He had managed to avoid difficulties, pain, realization, with a shrewd instinct. She said eagerly:

"Let's take a chance, Merle. She's so thoroughly disreputable, I don't believe any one would pay any attention to her. I don't believe she could do a thing. After all, it's known that she has blackmailed people before. Mr. Bowen, others, know it. We have strong friends,

Merle—Dunny, Lattimers, Bowens, Welches—the best in town, to stand by us. Let her go ahead, and let it come to court, and face her down with it. Unless she brings a damage suit against you, over the boy, what can she do, but slander?”

“Well, let’s go to bed. Let’s sleep on it, to-night, Jenny.”

They went up-stairs wearily and undressed and lay down beside each other in the dark, both wide-awake, thinking, thinking. Jenny rose at last, and went to cover her boys again—a thing she did several times every night. The baby, Susan, slept in her crib by Jenny’s bed, but the boys were now in the big room in the center of the house. Their bathroom and Mrs. Sims’ room lay beyond. The curtains were pinned back, the air came in softly through the wide open windows.

Jenny bent over her boys with a great yearning in her heart. And with it there flooded upon her a reluctant, a helpless compassion for Molly. Molly had no choice as to the ways she walked, Jenny thought. What could she have done in a fair fight? Who would have helped her, heeded her, championed her? Suppose life had fallen out differently for Jenny, and one of her children—Susan—Fowler—was out among strangers, and she tormented with longing? Her children were so beautiful. She had prayed for the gift of them with a passionate intensity. Their arms flung out, their sweet milky breath, their soft mouths and noses. Merle’s face was as round as a young moon, and the silken lashes lay down over his blue eyes. Fowler was darker, more beautiful, more wilful and brilliant, and Tom was all baby yet, round and fat. They were so good, when they slept like this. God had answered her prayer. Now, He must protect them all from disgrace.

But her compassion, her reluctant understanding of Molly could not bring her to sacrifice this other little boy, to tear him from the home he loved and where he was so happy and well taught, and give him back to Molly. The thought of yielding to threats was also intolerable to her. It was not to be borne, after what Molly had said, that they should yield to her. It was against pride, against nature, against good sense. Molly had given her child away of her own wish, had, in fact, begged Merle to help her find a home for it. Now she could not wantonly plunge every one into confusion and distress.

Jenny went back to their own room and sat down on the side of the bed, thinking deeply. Merle lay silent, his eyes closed, but she knew he was awake.

“Merle?”

“What is it, Jenny?”

“Merle—let me decide this, let me say, this once, what we shall do.”

“What do you think, Jenny?” Ah, the deep respect in his tone. It was rich with confidence in her, in her judgment, in her good sense, in her *self*. Her heart lifted with gratitude to hear it.

“Let it ride, Merle. Wait and see. You’ll have some warning. She isn’t a clever person. She doesn’t think clearly. I believe she is bluffing. I have a feeling about it—that she always bluffs. When it works, she is that much ahead. When it doesn’t, she goes no farther. I can’t believe she’d really harm you, when you’re almost the only friend she’s ever had. And this was all her own doing, not yours. Anyhow, I can’t bear the thought of allowing her to dictate to us. Just wait. Will you?”

He was silent a long time. At last he said reluctantly:

“If you wish.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

MERLE IN CONGRESS

Nothing happened. The days passed slowly. Merle went ahead making speeches. He looked white and tired, but neither he nor Jenny said anything to each other about the matter of Molly. Jenny stayed close at home. Susan had a slight cold. The boys seemed to Jenny to be terribly wild, and the rows between Merle and Fowler dismayed her. She spanked them both soundly, and felt some nervous relief at the excitement and their astonishment. It sobered them, too. But she could understand that the children were susceptible to the electric anxiety in the house.

She saw, too, that Fowler had no mind at all to yield to Merle's domination simply because Merle was the older, but intended to have and hold for himself. Though smaller, he was strong, and of more violent temper than his older brother. He was very jealous of the baby, and paid more attention to her than the others did. Jenny felt that it would be a torment to him always, to stand so close between Merle and Tom. Fowler's instinct was to strike out and make room for himself. He would not yield to either of them.

He was difficult when his father corrected him, refusing to be governed, storming and crying and kicking out with his fat little legs. But he obeyed Jenny's slightest wish, was sorry more quickly when she was displeased with them all, followed her about persistently. Jenny saw that his life would be dominated by women. Susan and Jenny were his idols, now, the two Merles and Tom his enemies. The baby, indeed, could have had

his little heart. He yielded to her slightest wish. He touched her small plump hands when he could, and gave her whatever he had. He could not eat until she was in her high chair at the end of the table. When she fell, he was the first to reach her and help her to her feet. He watched over her with a care born of the purest affection. Young Merle, Jenny saw, was like his father. He would rule when he could, yield when he couldn't. He would be able to win whatever help he needed, to forget what he wished to forget.

There was in Jenny's heart a great, a desperate desire for them to be good. She began, from the cradle, to deepen and widen Susan's affections and edge her sense of responsibility. She watched for the smallest faults with deep humility. She was too quick to accuse, too suspicious of the boys, Merle told her. She was severe to an extreme about little falsehoods, small deceits. And she scarcely ever left her children.

Merle, elected by a comfortable majority, went alone to Washington. It was decided that Jenny would come later, but a round of mumps kept her at home. Later, they would get a house and take Mrs. Sims and the babies and live in Washington while Merle was there. Jenny did not anticipate it with any great delight. It was something she would have to do for Merle. Her own social instinct had never been very active. She was satisfied with Hilltown people, a little scornful of outlanders.

On the day of his election Merle turned over the paper at Stone City for seventy thousand dollars. This money he put into Federal Land Bank Bonds and gave to Jenny. She had a safety-deposit vault now, and she took the stiff papers—seventy of them, worth a thou-

sand dollars each—down and put them away. She could not forbear to show them to Mr. Bowen. He nodded, as he turned them over in his hands.

“I never knew it to fail yet, that when people save and take their hard times when they are young, success comes to them, in every way. There isn’t anything accidental about this, Jenny.”

Jenny said, “I’m glad, for Merle’s sake.”

Mr. Bowen said something about “Her husband is known in the gates, where he sitteth among the elders of the land.”

Jenny looked at him. “Do you think I have been a good wife, Mr. Bowen?” she asked, so eagerly that he smiled a little.

“The best young wife I know, Jenny,” he told her.

“It is very important to me,” she answered simply.

He seemed to understand. He was not one of the careless ones who forgot things, Jenny knew. His cold, humorless blue eyes looked at her with commendation. Jenny felt the old rush of gratitude to him for his friendship to herself and to Merle. It had more meaning for her than the esteem of more affectionate, more casual people. It was a marvelous thing—to have a friend.

The *Hilltown Journal* was making a good income for its owners. With that, and with Merle’s salary as congressman, they could continue to save and have everything they needed at the same time. Jenny kept a weather eye on the paper while Merle was away, looking it over carefully and critically, counting the lines of advertising, reporting to Merle. But she did not go down to the paper, or intrude on Mr. Johnson or his young advertising man in any way.

She missed Merle tremendously that winter and the next. The routine of the house seemed less important. He wrote long concise letters to her. He was very interested in everything that was going on. He could, he realized, only scratch the surface of things, only show himself obedient, loyal and capable. If he was sent back, as he expected to be, it would be necessary for her to come with him. The business of entertaining, silly as it seemed, was yet of great importance. He could see that the women mattered. The senior senator's wife, from home, was a very able woman, intelligent and shrewd. She had made a place for herself. She received the most coveted invitations and was held in high esteem. It would be important for Jenny to please her, when the time came. A tiresome business, perhaps, but necessary. After a term or two in the House, he would like to have a try at state politics at home, and come back, later, to the Senate—it was his program.

At Christmas, Merle and Jenny, and Dunny with them, went to the Governor's Christmas Ball. Jenny had been paying more attention to her personal appearance with Merle's rise in public life. She had taken stock of herself and found that she was worn with child-care and confinement. But her vitality, like her mother's, seemed inexhaustible. Her figure was lovelier now than it had been when she was a girl. Her skin had become somewhat dull and sallow with repeated child-bearing, and her hair a little dry. But these things she had remedied with care, giving particular attention, over a period of months, to her cold creams, her oil shampoos, and to greater exercise and more rest for herself. The response was surprising. She was mature and for the

first time in her life really beautiful, in a complete and satisfying way. There was not the slightest sign of fading or withering upon her, but a new bloom and strength. Her dark eyes were a little sad, but her smile was serene and charming. Her concern with her appearance had nothing to do with any wish to entice or hold Merle. She knew that he had never considered her beautiful, that he was indifferent to her appearance. But she knew that she would need every weapon in dealing with a new world of women.

She had, too, exquisitely beautiful clothes. All of the long felt lack of them was in abeyance now, as the sheerest chiffons, the softest velvets and furs were her own possessions. She did not care for personal adornment in itself, but for its practical benefits.

Dunny, going with them to the state capital, in Merle's big, new, enclosed car, talked so much that Jenny wondered if he were a little drunk. He sat beside her at the banquet and wrote on her menu such biting comments and criticisms of the speakers that she was almost hysterical between amusement and the need for decorum.

Jenny was nervous and excited at the glitter and display, the jewels and fine gowns, the general impression of unlimited wealth. Her dancing had all been done in the old Armory at home, her highest conception of splendor, the old Kent house. Now she met people whose names had been legend to her, and found them all a little disappointing, face to face.

Dunny danced with her more often than Merle did, brought her partners, introduced her to a great many people. She wondered how he knew them all. He was, she saw, a man of considerable importance. He could be the next judge on the circuit bench, Merle informed

Jenny, but Dunny wouldn't make any effort for himself.

There was no doubt in Jenny's mind that Dunny was the most distinguished man there. His dry composed face, his exceeding good-looks, were more attractive now than when he was a boy and his lack of brawn had counted against him. He was thin, not tall, and he was suave, with the quirk of humor at his lips. Jenny was a little amazed at him. How had he come to be such a great man, and she not know it? He and Merle were both younger than the other men. They were both men of fine appearance. Others were bald, fat, tall and stooped, of sedentary habits, men either with strong cynical faces, or soft hypocritical eyes. Jenny felt that she was not going to like politics, and told Dunny as much. He laughed.

"Too late now to decide that, Jenny," he said. "Merle is in it, for good or bad. He's being talked about everywhere as the next governor. The powers that be have their eye on him. He's a fine party man. No one seems to have the slightest doubt of his integrity, but he hasn't any wild or noble idea. He's obedient. A natural instrument for politicians."

"I don't like to hear you say that. Merle's too good a man to be an instrument—for anything or any one," she replied.

"Of course, Jenny," he answered. "I'm sorry."

"Perhaps Merle should have stayed in business," she said uneasily.

"My own opinion," he nodded. "But he's in politics now, and he seems to have a liking and a gift for it. You'll have to help him make a go of it, Jenny, as you have helped him in everything else."

Merle came to take her to the governor and his wife. They were charming to Jenny and prophesied success for Merle. A cadaverous old man took her out on the dance floor. His name was that of the power behind the throne. Jenny forced herself to be gracious to him, and later to his lieutenants. But it was a relief to be with Dunny again when he came to claim her.

"I'm provincial," she told him. "I like people I know better than new people. I think Mr. Bowen and Mr. Oliphant and your father, and Doctor Lunt, and Judge Lattimer are far more notable than any of these men. See those four that are taking Merle off somewhere for another drink and another conference? They look like grave-diggers."

Dunny laughed. They danced without much talk but with mutual pleasure. Jenny had had it in her mind all evening to ask Dunny a question, and she did it as they stood together after the encore. She tried to keep the excitement out of her voice.

"Do you know what has happened to Molly Clarke? I haven't seen her this winter. Her house is closed."

"She is in Arizona, dying of tuberculosis," he answered.

Jenny was startled, frightened mysteriously.

"How do you know, Dunny?"

"I made a will for her, before she went away. She came to my office on election day, and asked me to make it. It's a very remarkable document. She knew, then, what was the matter with her. I couldn't do what she had planned, so we changed it. Did you know she is rich?"

"Molly? Rich?"

"Yes, indeed. By Hilltown standards, anyhow. Half

a million, at least. The finest securities money can buy. Stocks and bonds, the best in America. She bought for cash, on the open market. She had us close her place in Stone City and invest the money. She lives alone, in a house she bought in Phœnix. A trained nurse and a housekeeper live with her. I can just see her, can't you? Wrapped in some gorgeous quilted robe, lying in a chair on a screened porch, hours on end, silent and motionless."

"Yes, I can see her. But, Dunny, you would never have thought she could accumulate so much money, nor have the wit to do it, would you?"

"I don't know of any figure more tragic than Molly," he answered so sincerely that Jenny felt stirred and full of wonder. But her mind was occupied with its own fears.

"You couldn't tell me about her will, could you, Dunny?"

"Of course not. You know better than to ask it. It wouldn't interest you anyhow, Jenny."

"Sorry, Dunny."

He took her hand and turned it over and looked at the inside of it.

"Such a wilful hand!" he said. "Nothing is to be allowed to interfere with its destiny. A strong hand, Jenny, with a head line like a man's. I think you must have some of your mother's extraordinary intelligence, after all, though you are practically illiterate. A good mind put to ordinary uses, to mending clothes and washing babies. A great gift for romance—finding its outlet in spoiling and waiting on and prospering a self-satisfied husband! Don't you read anything, or try to do anything with your gifts beyond housekeeping and money-saving?"

She looked at him demurely.

"I'm afraid of books," she told him.

"But your hand is unhappy. Health is there, but a thousand anxieties. I never saw a hand more criss-crossed with the minute lines of fears."

She closed her hand against his eyes. He stood holding her fist in a little ball. He lifted it to his cheek for a moment, and looked at her, his brown eyes bright.

"Why don't you have a little love-affair with me, Jenny?" he said half mockingly. "There are subtleties to romance you've never known. You're just at the perfect age for rendezvous. You're husband's best friend, an old sweetheart—a few notes, a telephone call or two in code, stolen meetings—nothing more. Doesn't it attract you? I would be discreet as the Sphinx."

She chose to laugh at him, but her heart trembled a little. She had a disturbing moment. It might prove dangerous, playing with Dunny. A queer clairvoyant thought came to her. What a magnificent lover he would be. But her common sense returned to her—it was only Dunny!

"Don't you think I'm a little young yet?" she asked him. "To say nothing of your own surprise and funk—if I played up to you! Nothing would dismay you more! Besides, I don't believe I could be got for gold—and I couldn't possibly claim neglect as an excuse."

"That's because you don't know the difference," he said lightly. "But you haven't told me what it is you fear so much, Jenny. You have a nice home and the husband you wanted. You have plenty of money and four beautiful children. You have a brilliant future. Tell me," he insisted, as she did not answer, "what do you fear?"

She looked at him.

"I told you once," she said, in a low throbbing voice, "I am afraid of Marian Caruthers. I am afraid of justice."

"You can't forget, can you?" he said. "And Merle—is not afraid? And I—you are not afraid of me, Jenny?"

"I could never be afraid of you."

"You are right," he said, and then, "But you have nothing to fear. You remember you said to me once about your father—nothing could be bad enough—to make such punishment justified. And you have never done anything—that you should walk in fear. If I could free you from that, Jenny—if I could free you——"

"No one can free me," she said, "save myself."

Merle found them standing so, hand in hand, lost in thought.

"You look like the chief mourners," he said to them. "What are you glooming about?"

He had some friends with him, and he brought them forward and presented them to Jenny. All of them were acquaintances of Dunny. The hand-shaking and politeness were general. Merle had been drinking, but he was only a little drunk. A tall fair man who stood close to him was more than that. Merle had taken the responsibility for him upon himself, with innocent opinions of his own sobriety. Jenny said a low good-by to Dunny and went off with Merle and his companions. They stayed the night, and when they drove home in the morning found that Dunny had already returned to Hilltown by train,

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JENNY FEELS SECURE

MOLLY died in the following summer. She was brought home and buried beside her father in the poorer part of the old cemetery, in the lot Merle had got for her, years before. When her will was probated and published it caused a sensation. Molly left one hundred thousand dollars to a Roman Catholic home for delinquent girls. She left one hundred thousand dollars each to four Hilltown boys, to Fowler Ferguson, to James Lattimer, to Mr. Bowen's son, and to Johnson's youngest. All of them but Fowler, who was five, were fourteen years old.

This was the bulk of her estate. Susan Fowler's house she left to Susan Ferguson, her house in Phoenix to the nurse who had cared for her. She left what remained, after all her debts were paid, to Dunny's firm—a matter only of a few thousand dollars. He had no other fees from her.

The astuteness of this will seemed remarkable to Jenny. Molly had been able to leave a small fortune to her own son without disturbing him or bringing special attention upon him. It was surmised in the town that she had favored the children of the few people who had treated her kindly: Judge Lattimer because he had refused to allow her to be driven out of her house; Johnson because, when there was the uproar over her return to Hilltown, he had not mentioned it in the *Hilltown Journal*, though there had been veiled editorials about it in the county papers. Mr. Bowen, it was known, had often acted as business agent for her, and had taken

care of her financial affairs with justice and wisdom. He was a man above reproach and innuendo, dealing honorably with rich and poor, famous and infamous. As for the Fergusons, it was well known that Susan Fowler had befriended Molly, and Merle's father had been kind to her, too. The will also provided that with the death of any of the beneficiaries before his majority, the sum should revert to the school first mentioned in her will. Mr. Bowen's son, who died in his sixteenth year, was the only one who did not live to receive the inheritance from Molly.

Well, they were lucky, the town said.

Jenny would have liked to refuse the bequest. Merle, too, was ungrateful and oddly disturbed about it. But they were not free to do so. The sum was left in trust for Fowler until he was twenty-one. Dunny was trustee. The bank was to hold and handle the actual funds. The interest could be drawn, for education or travel, or for nursing and care in illness, but otherwise, it was to be turned back upon the capital. The instrument of trusteeship, the will and the investment of the money was rigidly and practically drawn—the kind of document Dunny knew how to make. Susan's house was to be rented, kept in good repair and the income invested for her, until her eighteenth birthday, when the deed and title would be delivered to her without restriction.

If the bequest from Molly was refused, the children would have to do it, a matter little likely when they were young and greedy, and Molly only a name and not anathema to them.

But it was dust in Jenny's mouth. She could scarcely bear it, could scarcely answer decently the congratulations of her friends. Money, money! The judge and

the banker and the editor took it with unconcealed pleasure. After all, it wasn't like rentals from Molly's brothel in Stone City, nor like the blackmail money she was rumored to have extorted from indiscreet visitors. It was all good stocks and bonds, and the children were innocent of any knowledge of it. And Molly had made money just by investing! Her neighbors even went so far as to hint that Molly had reformed, when the amount of her income gave her a psuedo respectability. She had lived quietly, these last few years, and even, it was whispered, become a Roman Catholic, though she had not been buried by the Roman Catholic Church. This rumor, in itself, was poor recommendation in a place as intensely Protestant as Hilltown, but it was sanction of a kind.

Jenny wondered how much Dunny knew. Everything, probably. Well, she had told him about herself. None of it was new, yet it wounded her to think of Molly speaking of it. It did not matter to Dunny greatly, she supposed, that his wife's brother was Molly's son. He had always had a certain compassion for Molly, and the whole affair of his marriage was becoming unreal. But—how had Molly known? Perhaps she had never known, and it seemed to Jenny very pitiful, if she had only made a guess—and never been sure.

The years slid away from them. The boys grew taller and stronger. They quite took Jenny's breath, they grew so fast. The family was in Washington four winters, and during that time Dunny found business in the East, and saw them at more or less regular intervals. It seemed that the very wish he had confided to her—his wish to free her from fear—had done that, a little. The fact that there was some one who knew and understood her plight made it easier to bear, though, again, years were

to pass, without talk between them. But Dunny was there! Dunny knew everything.

The three boys went to a school in Washington which presidents' sons had attended. Even prejudiced Jenny, who never ceased to like everything at home better than anything elsewhere, could see that the school was superior to the public school in Hilltown. At eleven, Merle was better informed than Jenny had been in high school. Susan, with Mrs. Sims for a shadow, came and went about her own life of school, and dancing lessons, music lessons and play in the public parks. Jenny kept closer personal supervision over Susan than she did over the boys.

Jenny was very successful in her social life in the capital. She was liked well by other women for she was not vain, nor coquettish, and she was natural. Her beauty, poise, the "air" she had, were of service to her. But she was often homesick for her own house. None of it really mattered to her, in those inner recesses of her soul where things of vital importance registered their moments. She would remember the silver brooch her mother wore when she died, the smell of tuberose, the first night Merle sat on the porch with her, the weight of Kathleen Kent's head on her hand, long after the most important person in Washington had become a nameless shadow.

They were back in Hilltown during the long summer months, and the life there resumed always its familiar, charmed routine. Dunny sat on an important commission, with our entry into the hostilities in Europe. He grew a little dustier, a little grayer, took cases to the Supreme Court, and won them; took cases for other lawyers up and down the state, was consulted about con-

stitutional and corporation law, and had the self-respect to ask huge fees. He had postponed his aspirations for the bench until he grew older. Active practise was a great adventure to him, now, a sublimation of lost causes. Substantially, because of an innate dislike for carelessness and waste, rather than for any love of money, he improved and built up the small fortune his father had left him. As for himself, he lived on, always, much the same; his habits, always a little elegant, unchanged from year to year, his mother's house, always beautiful, exactly as it had been when she died. Jenny grew into the habit of expecting him to come to see them regularly. She talked to him about the boys when Merle was gone, and he advised her soundly. Several times, as the years passed, he was pursued by ambitious women, but his immaculate habits of life, his skill and understanding, kept him free.

Merle was away a great deal. Insensibly, he was becoming coarsened, Jenny saw with regret, though he was superior to other men who were his confederates. He still had some boyish quality that was endearing, some clean eager essence that was Merle. He was drinking more or less all the time, but insisted that he was unaffected by it, that it had nothing to do with his stand as a "dry" politically. Jenny supposed it was the inevitable accumulation of years. She was not the same person she had been. One had to make concessions, adjustments. She avoided the logic of the fact that Dunny showed no deterioration, but had gained steadily in poise and power, through the years. For Merle's safe return from his frequent trips she was always grateful. For his generosity to all of them, his pride in his boys, his bigness and abundant health, she felt the old springing well of affection.

Her heart began to be at rest. The years were winnowing away her ancient fears with their invisible flails. The children absorbed her now. The struggle between Fowler and his two brothers, who had now joined in a league against him, never let up. Merle's and Tom's temperaments were congenial. Susan, too, would take Merle's side, though Fowler was far kinder and more generous to her than the others. Jenny thought about them all the time. She tried to teach Merle to be more just and affectionate with Fowler, to teach Fowler to give up his will without anguish, to take defeat more easily—tried to instil into him the invaluable defense of indifference, which she herself had never learned. She constantly told Susan how dearly Fowler loved her. But she could see that her little daughter exploited that love mercilessly. In the end, their temperaments remained much the same, their problems for ever unsolved, and her need to protect Fowler undiminished. Susan was inevitably spoiled, but she grew sweeter and more affectionate every year. She did not much like to be petted or kissed, but always struggled to get down to the floor, to be left free to run and play. It was Fowler who, when his legs were hanging to the floor, still climbed up and curled in Jenny's lap.

He was the brightest of them all. He read books far too advanced for his years, with a precocious understanding. He and Dunny were friends. Fowler was influenced by Dunny more quickly than by his father, and they had curious grown-up conversations, not at all what one would expect from a man of Dunny's reserve and a boy not yet in his teens. Dunny never talked down to Fowler or asked him silly questions, but treated him with manly courtesy. Merle was impatient with Fowler's cleverness, given to sweeping him aside, to "taking him

down." Young Merle and Tom seemed more solid, more satisfying to their father.

And so Jenny, like Merle, forgot a little. She thought no more of her mother and father, of Molly and Marian Caruthers, but seemed instead, to drift safely upon that feminine sea of endless small tasks, of parties and women's clubs and children's illnesses. It worried her now, that she had to spend a great deal of the precious time with the children in correcting and disciplining them. They filled the house and the yard to overflowing. There were their dogs and cats, their rabbits—one terrible year, a goat. Constant activity, coming and going, incessant demands upon time and temper.

Jenny would have liked to be able to sit down and talk to them and teach them, but it had to be done on the wing, sweet and serious along with haste and impatience. "Merle—you wouldn't lie to me, would you?" "Fowler, stop sulking, and eat your cereal." "No, Susan—obey me, please! We'll not argue about it." "Why—Tom, how clean you are—come kiss Mother." The picture of the dream hours of talk and confidences, the mother romping with her laughing children, were never realized. Even the picnics and swims were interspersed with cautions and corrections. It took so much sheer energy to dominate and control their growing wills. Their bodies grew and throve beneath her hands, their buttons were abruptly too tight, their shoes too small. Their ideas, their conceptions changed too quickly for her. Merle left their training in her hands. He seldom corrected, never interfered. All her children loved her with a great affection, but it was Fowler who loved her most.

The war came and went in a fever of work, with flying

hands and many sacrifices, a constant, "Thank God the boys are too small." Merle was busy and important, now, in Washington, and Jenny stayed on in Hilltown. She didn't like to judge him, but it seemed somewhat ridiculous that he should be so officious. She came home from a trip to Washington, alone on the train, one cold winter day. There was a recruiting officer of the navy on the train with fifteen or sixteen half-grown boys for the naval training ship on Lake Michigan. Jenny looked at them with indignant pain. Their necks were still thin, their bones still green. They laughed and swaggered with childish self-consciousness, their temples showing soft under a golden down of hair. Their faces were, to her, the faces of babies, unschooled, infantile, trusting. Her own boys seemed to her as old, as fit for war, as these. Yet all these recruits must be seventeen or eighteen, at least. They were the important ones. Not Merle and his colleagues.

Merle gained prestige by his work in the war. He came back with all his political connections strong as iron bands. And so, when Jenny was forty, Merle was elected governor of the state. He was at the capital city all day, and called her on long distance at midnight, when the poll seemed to indicate a good victory for him.

"I'll drive down in the morning," he said, when he had given her the news.

Jenny lay awake that night, stirred, thinking what it would mean to the boys, what it would mean to her, to have Merle the governor. She could not seem to project the future at all. No pictures came in answer to her speculations, only a blank. But she felt oddly startled, thinking of herself as a girl, telling herself now, without conviction, that she was the governor's wife!

It would mean leaving Hilltown—perhaps for ever! A matter which she considered with regret but without conviction.

“It is only the beginning—for Merle,” she thought, understanding his vaulting ambition. She saw that he had become a person of power in his own right, that he had ceased to depend on her energy and wisdom. She could hardly wait, now, to see him. A vast impatience filled her. He was still her Merle, she told herself, charming and quick, with clear bright eyes, and a lock of wavy hair, his hands big and bony. She remembered how red and cold they had looked one night when he had talked to her, the winter that Marian was at college. But though these pictures brought usually the accompaniment of certain emotions, to-night she felt no response. She wondered if she had been neglecting him. She went back over the recent years with a frightened feeling. It had been a long time since they had really talked, really loved each other. They had fallen into the married crime of habit, each of them tremendously absorbed in affairs that took constant effort and energy. Had she, as Dunny had said, furthered Merle’s material welfare and not considered his soul? But she found herself innocent. Merle was not spiritually minded. He had no impulses of an esthetic nature that she had ever discovered. Every one, she comforted herself, in these years of war and reconstruction lived a crowded life. The most vital relationships had to be taken in full stride, as she had to love the children. Men and women did not sit in the gloaming, any more. Jenny doubted if they ever had. The words, oddly, brought to her mind a memory she could not place of herself and Dunny by Mrs. Bonniwell’s fountain, one summer night.

She thought, now, forcibly, of her mother's porch, with the bleak old house, its one lighted window leaning over them. And she and Merle there, alone, late in the night. How *could* her mother have been so careless? She thought of those two young things with an impersonal pity and horror, but it no longer seemed herself. They had been only children. Was it for that that she had been so frightened all these years? Ah, she knew now that every one had sins to make cowards of them. Every man and woman lived in danger of the judgment.

Far in the night the phone rang again, and she went to it with rapidly beating heart. It was Merle again.

"Put on the coffee pot," he said. She knew at once that he had been celebrating. "I'll be home for breakfast, Jenny. I can scarcely wait to see you. Nothing can stop me, now! I want you to plan to get away with me for a few days, will you? And don't tell the boys, till I get home, about the election. I want to tell them myself."

But he never told them. He did not come home in the morning, but telephoned again that he had some things to look after, and an evening or two later he called Jenny and told her that he would still be in the state capital for a few days, "getting things straightened up," but that he would be home for the week-end. But on Friday night, he called again, asking her to send his tackle box and his rods—specifying carefully which ones—to him on the morning train. "I'm going with Abernathy, for a week's fishing. Seven of us are going. You don't mind, do you, Jenny?"

"Not at all," she said, and wrote down carefully the address he gave her, where a wire would reach him. But

JENNY FOWLER

as the week passed, without further word, the tenderness and poignancy of that night of his election faded away from her. She was amused at herself—and hurt. Evidently, Merle did not feel “that way.” She anticipated the new life with some dismay. Was he always going to be off somewhere—away from them, busy and preoccupied? She could imagine the fishing trip—men in boots and sweaters, sitting about an uncovered table, talking politics and playing poker far into the night, sleeping late in the morning—getting up, and reaching for a “drink,” going out to fish an hour or so—hearty, drinking, swearing, prosperous men. It was a life Merle loved; dearer than his family, she thought resentfully.

One evening she received a wire from him that he had left camp, and was making the night drive home. All this time Jenny had been receiving congratulations, alone, from the townspeople—telephone calls, wires, had come in. Merle’s desk was piled with things for him to do. She would have to entertain some of the local people at once. She knew that some of his satellites in Hilltown resented his continued absence as much as she did. But they would forgive him, when he came in—smiling, laughing, shaking hands, warm and kind—just as she would forgive him.

At half past six in the morning, Jenny heard some one knocking at her door. She got up eagerly and went down in her negligée to open the door for him. He had lost his key again, she thought with amusement—her heart lifting to the sense of everything right again, with Merle at home. But it was Dunny who stood on the porch. He was pale, and his face was closed against her probing eyes. But his voice was shaken when he spoke to her.

"May I come in, Jenny?"

She knew, at once. But she drew back mechanically, let him in and closed the door. They stood in the hall. He looked at her, and after a moment he said with difficulty:

"I won't tell you to be brave. You're always that, Jenny. They just called me from Millers' Corners. You know, Jenny—where the road comes up past a lumber yard, and rises in a grade for the railroad crossing?"

She made no sign. He said slowly:

"The train caught the car square, Jenny. It must have been instantaneous. He was gone when they got down to him. He was alone."

She stood looking at him. He thought she was going to topple, and he put out his hand to steady her. She had felt like this once before. When had she known this same sensation, as though her life's blood was ebbing out in some mysterious wound—and death itself engulfing her? She remembered, as she stood, waiting for the pain to strike her. It was the evening when Molly had come and accused and threatened them.

Jenny looked at Dunny. She was standing in the narrow hall of her mother's old house again, with her mother and Merle. Her words would have been incomprehensible to any one but the man who stood there, a heart-break of compassion in his eyes.

"And I was just beginning to feel secure," she whispered.

BOOK THREE
DUNNY.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

READJUSTMENT

IT WAS a new loneliness. It seemed that the days of her childhood, when she and her mother lived alone in the dark untidy house, with her mother's attention ever elsewhere, had come back on her. The clean, bright, beautiful house where she lived with her children had lost that vigor, that wholeness of family life which emanated from Merle, even when he was gone.

She saw now that she had been too much wrapped up in Merle and her children. Since her betrayal of Marian, who had been the one great and intimate friend of her youth, she had never allowed herself to become involved in a deep or intimate friendship with any other woman. Scores of casual friends she had. They came to her house, she went to theirs. Especially since Merle had become one of the great men of the town had women flocked after Jenny. She was kindly, courteous, even gay with them, but none came past the barrier of small talk, of nonsense and casual intimacy. Perhaps she was nearer to Mrs. Sims than to any one, but it was a nearness engendered by habit and the mutual sharing of many problems, rather than that of choice.

The nights now were almost intolerable. Often as Merle had been away, she had slept soundly and sweetly. But that was changed. She started up in fright if a dog barked. She rose in the night and moved uneasily about, looking out of the windows into the harmless moonlit streets of the old town, watching carefully the shadow of some bush upon the lawn, listening, straining her ears for marauders. What if some one should come

into the house, she thought with fright. What if some maniac should kidnap one of her children? Her little Susan! What if some evil creature knew she could give ransom?

In the mornings her folly and fear would bring disgust and self-reproach after them, but at night, it was the same again. One night she wakened with the strangest eery feeling, and saw, standing at the foot of her bed, a white figure, motionless in the half light. A small scream escaped her, and then she saw that it was Fowler. He spoke to her gently, calling her by name.

“You can sleep, now, Jenny. I’m guarding you.”

She was greatly touched. After that, she seemed to get new courage. How demoralized she must be, if even the children knew it!

Dunny looked after and settled her affairs for her. All the broken threads of Merle’s entangled business he took up and mended. The hue and cry of Merle’s sudden death died away into a gradual silence and emptiness, strange and alarming to Jenny.

They had not saved much, these last years. But Jenny had never touched the seventy thousand dollars Merle had given her when Susan was a baby. With the insurance, after all the debts were paid, she had almost eighty-five thousand dollars, her home and a half-interest in the *Journal*. She had no financial worries. There was enough for all of them. And Fowler would have a fortune of his own—and Susan a house!

But she grew careful, fearful and saving again. It had been planned that Merle, who was thirteen, was to go to Culver. He was already enrolled. But she said to the boys, moved perhaps by wisdom, “I can’t afford

it now." It would be good for the boys, she said to Dunny, to feel that the money was limited. And she could not let them go away—not now. So she entered Merle and Fowler in the first year of the local high school. Fowler was not twelve until spring, but he had long since caught up with Merle in school. They had had fine training in the East. Both of them were more than ready for high school. Tom was in the sixth grade, Susan in the fourth.

Thriftily Jenny laid her plans, to live as simply as possible, to dress the children economically, to keep her capital intact. With what the paper paid her, her income was about five thousand dollars a year—less than they had had for years, but adequate and more in Hilltown. But if the boys were to go to college, she would have to save at least a thousand a year from her income for that, although Fowler's college education could be financed from Molly's money. After a little, when she felt she could manage, she would let Mrs. Sims go. But not now. Not this winter. She could save, for the present, with small economies and the boys in public school.

It was a bitter winter. Cold and zero weather, ice, storms and sleet were interspersed with demoralizing seasons of rain and fog. Jenny felt that the frost had bitten into her very soul. She felt she would never be warm and happy again. There were days and nights when it seemed to her that she could not go on, that she could not manage, without Merle, without his warm laugh, his big strong bony hands, his arm about her, his activities. She thought of him as he had been those first years of marriage, before her father came home, or again, when the babies were small. The latter Merle, successful, important, a little coarse, passed from her mind completely and for ever.

She told herself continually that she must live now for her children. What would she do without them? But she was young and vital to be living only for the children, whose selfish minds were entirely upon their own affairs.

She made a great effort. She gathered her life together. She *must* go on. She might live another forty years—probably would, though the thought was appalling. Her life, without Merle, seemed a ship without a rudder.

It was during this first difficult winter that Marian Caruthers came back into Jenny's life in a manner altogether surprising to her. Marian was now the principal of the high school, a much respected teacher. She was the Latin instructor. The boys began to talk of her during their hurried noon meal, speaking to one another, not to their mother.

"Miss C'ruthers says that when the Romans besieged a city, the siege lasted a long time. She says sometimes the watchmen on the walls and the soldiers that besieged the city got to be friends, talked back and forth, and loaned things to one another."

Tom listened, wide-eyed.

"Honestly?" he said.

Merle nodded slowly and ate his desert. Fowler took up the tale.

"Miss C'ruthers says in the World War, where they had quiet sectors—isn't that what they called 'em, Merle?—that the men sometimes called back and forth to one another, over No Man's Land—the Fritzie and the French. And that's the same way it was in Rome. They besieged one city seven years. Can y'magine?"

Jenny, a little startled, listened to this high talk. A

few days afterward Fowler took up the new lore eagerly.

"We had hard Latin to-day, Muth. Prose. All the kids knew their stuff, so Miss C'ruthers was pleased with us, and she read us a story out of a red book, about how the sacred geese saved Rome. It was in the *Lives*, Muth. Have we got 'em? Can I read 'em?"

"Fowler, why don't you talk English, instead of a series of elisions? Certainly we have Plutarch's *Lives*. Among your grandmother's books, on the bottom shelf. But I think you are too young to get anything out of them. My mother said one needed maturity to enjoy Plutarch. It's the 'Life of Camillus,' in the first volume, that has the story of the geese in it, if you want to read it."

Her older children sat looking at her in complete astonishment. Merle said, with awe:

"Gee, Muth, do *you* know that?"

"I never thought *you* knew anything like that," said Fowler.

Jenny laughed. It was the first time she had laughed for weeks.

"Dunny once said to me that I was illiterate," she told Fowler, "but I didn't know the idea was prevalent. Why shouldn't I know that? I can read, can't I?"

"Well, gee," said Fowler, "of course—only—I didn't know you were educated, like Miss C'ruthers is." And then he said at once, politely, "Of course, *you're* pretty! And we love you the best. Don't we, Merle?"

"Of course," said Merle impatiently. "She's our mother!"

These remarks were illuminating, to say the least, and Jenny began to take an interest in homework, to read what the boys were studying, to talk to them about

it. She was stirred by a strange jealousy. She did not want them to love her best either because she was pretty or because she was their mother. She could detect in their attitude a certain condescension toward her. She supposed it was natural enough. She mustn't make it important. It was only the common fate of mothers to find children more impressed by outsiders than by the familiar voice of home. Yet there was a sting in their unconscious attitude that "Miss C'ruthers" was a superior being.

As spring came, Jenny felt deeply dissatisfied. All of her energy, that current which had carried her so strongly along the way of her own will, which had poured itself so unstintingly into Merle's success, needed an outlet greater than it had. Her dignity, which had suffered in her efforts to compete with the boys' teacher, came back to her as her interest in her own life revived.

She had not enough to do. The period of her mourning had thrown her out of contact with the social life of the town, and she had no wish to resume it. She was by nature too forceful to be satisfied with endless rounds of bridge. It was not as it might have been in a newer richer community, where the social battle would have required finesse and resource, money and planning. Jenny's place in Hilltown was secure now. She was established and would remain so without effort. At Washington it had been different. There the social qualification was a means to an end, there current swept against current in a game fascinating and worthy of one's best efforts. But in Hilltown most of the people of her own age and circumstances went about in groups of married couples, four, or six, or eight of them together in the evening, sharing trips, visiting back and forth—and from this life she was now definitely barred.

It was in May, with the sky gorgeous overhead, the green armies of young corn blades springing up in the plowed fields, the deep sweet breath of early summer rich upon the world, that she first conceived the idea of doing something outside her home. She was down-town and went at once to Dunny's office to talk to him. The stenographer took her name in, and Dunny came directly out to greet her, and take her to his own room. He placed a chair for her and sat down again before his own desk with law books lying open and marked all about him. He smiled at her with delight. She had not seen him for months. He looked fit and well, and she reflected that he always seemed much the same.

"Jenny! Tell me what I can do for you. Or better yet, tell me that you only came to see me."

She looked at him from under the narrow brim of her smart hat. Her eyes were very sad and puzzled. She looked slowly about the big front office. The windows opened out over the square, and they were like frames of pictures, with the soldier and the fountain, the green lawns, and the sky rising, dazzlingly blue and white, within them. The room was simply furnished. The walls were lined with books, to the very ceiling. A ladder on rollers, a few deep chairs, an old clean rug and Dunny's big desk furnished the place. Between the windows stood a great old walnut table that had been his father's, bearing an ancient hand press, and a litter of work.

"It looks attractive—a busy place. Dunny, I want to go to work again. I need something to do."

He was watching her intently. There was a smile of happiness on his face. He made no effort to conceal the sheer pleasure her visit gave him. At length he asked her:

"Haven't you more than enough to do? Isn't it one of the things Merle wanted for you—security so that you would never have to leave your home? It's what I would have wanted for you."

She smiled a little.

"The home's not the same, without Merle," she said simply. "I love my children, Dunny, and I try to teach them to do what's right. I look after them. They are strong and well. But I feel so restless. They are all in school now, all interested in their own lives. They are fond of me, but they won't want me hanging on them."

She told him a little about the boys, and "Miss C'ruthers." She told him she knew she must let other influences crowd her out. He nodded gravely.

"I'm on the Board of Education. I know. She's far the best teacher we have. We've been afraid, sometimes, that she might leave us. At first, when she was young, we took her on partly because she was a town girl, with good grades to her credit. It didn't matter as much to the town as it did to her. Her father's business gradually failed, you know. I wasn't on the Board then, but that's the story. And for a few years she struggled along pretty ineffectually, but then she seemed to get hold of herself. She began to take a deep interest in the children. She went back to summer school, year after year. She's very modern now, knows all the latest things in the science of education. She makes the remote things in books near and real to them. She stirs their minds. That's why they love her. It's surprising, because she really isn't an intellectual woman. Perhaps it is sympathy, perhaps just a talent for education. They are already beginning to come back to see her, the

young ones, in college or away at work. They write to her, and confide in her. She has great influence."

Jenny felt a wild jealousy at the praise, but she said steadily:

"It's a wonderful thing for her, isn't it? The boys think she is perfect."

Dunny looked at her a little sadly:

"Surely, Jenny, you would not deny her this great satisfaction, that she is useful and valuable in the world?"

Jenny's eyes filled with the tears that lay now so close to the surface. She answered him sincerely.

"I would not, Dunny. Believe me, I would not. I understand perfectly that it is ignoble of me, but if I thought that Marian could take my place, could even supersede me, with one of my boys, or with Susan, it would be a great blow to me."

"I can understand that," he said. "Yet sooner or later, in one way or another, you are doomed to lose them, Jenny."

Her hat felt tight upon her head. She knew such a weight of woe within her that it seemed she must bend double with it. She ran her fingers carefully under the brim of her hat, and drew her breath deeply to steady herself.

"Then," she said at last, "it is all the more imperative—that I have something—of my own!"

"I think perhaps it is imperative for every woman," he said, "for every human being. There have been times enough when the work here seemed dry and dead as something long forgotten by every one in the world but me. I have felt that I didn't care about it, didn't want to do it—that nothing mattered less. Yet there

was always unfinished business—cases to come up in court, briefs to prepare, or matters to straighten out for some one, and it is required, by what force we do not know, that we give full measure to those depending on us. Why this is required of us is not for me to say, but the obligation can not be avoided.”

“You love the law, don’t you?” she asked.

He smiled with amusement at the question.

“I don’t know whether I do or not,” he answered. “There are too many things wrong with it, to elicit love. But it is very compelling. When men and women go to law, Jenny, they are in deadly earnest. They want to win. They are upon fundamentals. No niceties about it—strike first and hardest—and win! Whether it is a woman fighting for her children or a divorce, or a man fighting for his money or his business, or some one out to break a will or collect damages—any kind of legal business brings out a terrible seriousness in people. Suits involving money, especially. Money is of such terrific importance to every one. It’s all so human, and yet, detached and orderly, like a play. How would you like it—to study law, and take it up as a serious work?”

“I would have to go to school,” she objected. “I couldn’t get away from home.”

“You could study at home,” he suggested, but she shook her head.

“I would have to do extension work for the university before I could start on my law course. It would take too long.”

“Have you thought of anything, Jenny? There’s the paper. You have a half interest in that. Why not work at it? After all, you helped to buy it, long ago. It’s as much yours as any one’s.”

"I've thought of that," she said, "but it means putting young Harley out of a job, and of course I couldn't do Johnson's work."

She paused, looked out of the window again, across the great square, with the massive court-house in the middle of it.

"Have you thought of some career in the arts, Jenny?"

She smiled in turn. "You flatter me," she said, and shook her head. "No, I think I am unsuited for that. I would rather do something in business. I like to keep books and accounts. All these years I have kept a record of my household expenditures. Do you know how few women do that, Dunny? And I did considerable work for Merle. He left all of his accounts to me, his banking and balancing his check-books and paying all the bills. I looked after other things for him, too, wrote letters, planned committee work, read and revised his speeches, and when he was very busy, I kept a record of engagements and did his telephoning. He never had a secretary, except when he was in Washington on committee work. With my looking after him, he could depend on a public stenographer now and then. I'm good at organization, at detail, at remembering. It's one reason my house runs smoothly, and everything is always clean and fresh, with the drawers filled with clean clothes, and the buttons sewed on. A small thing to a man's mind, perhaps, but a sign to me. I'm not creative, nor fitted for a profession."

"You wouldn't care for politics or social work?"

"No, Dunny. You know I wouldn't."

They sat in silence, and suddenly, unaccountably, Jenny's heart began to beat with thick heavy strokes.

She could feel the rapid crescendo of it in her temples, and in her throat, could feel it knocking against her ribs. She sat in complete silence, her thought and attention turned inward to this amazing tumult. The moment passed and she sighed.

"What do you think of my going into the bank, Dunny? I could go and see Mr. Bowen. I could buy some stock, if necessary, and work again at the books as I did when I was a girl. Or—it just comes to me, now—I might start a special department. I might have a woman's bureau, a service for the women of Hilltown, housewives and working girls, to make small loans to them, to advise them financially, and check up prices of real estate, titles and deeds, or the wisdom of contracts or business enterprises. I could invest money for them—do a brokerage business, perhaps. I'm just thinking this out as I go along, Dunny. It would solicit the accounts of women, and you know since the war women are earning and handling their own money more. I could do those small chores a country banker does, the making of deeds and mortgage papers. What do you think? I believe I might be useful, doing something like that."

His gaze was frankly admiring and a little surprised.

"I'm a stockholder in the bank. I'll back you in it, Jenny."

"I didn't come to you for that reason," she protested. "But just talking to you helped me to formulate this idea. I believe I will go to see Mr. Bowen, right away."

They talked a little longer, then Jenny rose to go. The wind that stirred in the room was sweet with spring. Dunny went down to the street door with her.

“Why don’t you go to the bank now while you are in the mood for it?” he pressed her. “I really think it would be wonderful for you, Jenny, to have something like that. Mrs. Sims can stay on with you. It will help you to gain your courage again, make a new life for you.”

“I’ll do that. It’s been good to talk to you, Dunny. You’re by way of being my dearest friend, now. I count on you.”

“Whatever you do,” he assured her gently, “I’m for you!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LONELINESS

THE young man who was responsible for the advertising in the *Hilltown Daily Journal* began to make occasion to see Jenny about one thing or another that might be construed to concern the paper. He came to her office in the bank with increasing frequency. Autumn lay deep over the valley. The corn was in shocks, the trees above the river were crimson and gold. Jenny had won through that bad week that marked the end of the first year since Merle's death, with a stiff enduring courage. She worked every day and spoke to no one of her loss. If any remembered, besides herself, they did not mention it to her.

Except Fowler. She found him at the foot of her bed again that night, standing watch over her; she called him to her; he sat beside her and held her hand, and they talked a long time. It seemed to Jenny the realest, nearest talk she had ever had with one of her children. Fowler told her that he wished to be like his father, but feared he never would be, because Daddy had something about him that was always gay, and Fowler was not gay. She understood that he was already idealizing Merle. She knew, too, that he would never be like Merle, and she knew it was because he was more civilized and complicated, perhaps even more intelligent, but she did not tell him this. She told him instead how kind Merle had always been—kind and generous—and sent him off to bed after a little while and lay thinking of him.

After that, she felt Merle very near her, and Fowler, too. The boys were in their second year of high school. They had spent the summer in camp at Culver, and Susan and Mrs. Sims had also gone for two weeks' vacation. But Jenny had worked right through the autumn heat.

She was, in fact, so engrossed with the thought of Merle, that she was at first unaware of Harley's persistent appearance on the scene. But one day at the bank, glancing up from some work she was doing, she found his eyes fixed on her with such open admiration, such a blaze, that she was startled and confused. Within a few days he came to her and asked her if he could come to her house to see her—to talk to her about a confidential matter. Somewhat amused and mystified, Jenny told him to come in some evening—she was always at home.

At eight o'clock that very evening he was at her door. Jenny left the children and went in to the big lamplit living-room. The young man was very serious—of all things most absurd, he thought Johnson was getting too old and doddering to edit the *Hilltown Daily Journal*. He thought they needed another man. Jenny, not understanding at once that Harley had sought about rather helplessly for a pretext to see her, was both amazed and indignant.

"But he is not more than fifty-five. And he is a half owner. How can you think he is too old? The advantages of his knowledge of the county, his wide acquaintance, his experience are only just coming into full use."

"You don't think fifty-five is old?" he asked.

Jenny smiled. "I am nearer to fifty-five than you are, by ten or fifteen years, so naturally I do not think he is

too old. Mr. Bowen is in his sixties, and he is an able and energetic man."

"I'm not so young," Harley protested. "I'm almost thirty."

"Indeed?" It was not of any interest to Jenny whether he was twenty-six, as she suspected, or twenty-eight, as he pretended. But he sat very solidly on the couch. He was a big young man, ruddy and bold. It seemed queer to Jenny to see a man sitting there with his hands about one knee. When he left she went to the door with him.

"It's a lovely night," he said, "frosty and clear. Why don't you come out and walk with me for an hour?"

Jenny would have liked it. The night was beautiful. But as she stood there, Harley, almost without his own volition, it seemed, put his arm around her and drew her close to him. As a woman in a dream, Jenny did not move or stir. The rough sleeve, over her black satin office dress, his warm hand upon her farther arm, the old familiar gesture of enclosure—— But when his lips actually touched her own she was galvanized into sudden violent fright and thrust him away so energetically that he almost stumbled.

"You dare!" she said, and he spoke to her imploringly:

"I'm so in love with you—I can think of nothing else. Oh, you are so beautiful, and so sad. I want to be your friend, to make you happy. Please be kind to me. I wouldn't offend you for the world. I want your regard, Jenny Ferguson——" His stammering fell into silence.

"Can't you see," she said wearily, "that all that is over for me? We'll not talk any more about it, please.

It is better for you to talk to Mr. Johnson about things that concern the paper. I would never interfere with his authority."

"And you won't let me see you?"

"No—no," she said. "It is impossible."

She closed the door. It was not true, what she had said. The touch of his arm had been pleasant and comforting. For the turn of her wrist she could have given herself into his embrace. She walked the floor all night—back and forth, back and forth, wringing her hands, whispering little impotent prayers for peace. Fowler came to her, but she was irritable and sent him off to bed offended.

Back and forth, through the long room.

She was not through with love!

Her children, her house, her job, her security, were not enough. Not enough! Not enough! She did not want to care for any man. She did not even like this young jackanapes, with his imploring sentimental voice, his crude desire. She cared less than nothing for him, she told herself vehemently, but his warm rough arm, the trembling note in his voice had been sweet to her. It seemed as though for the first time in all these fourteen months she realized the full weight of her bereavement. Never to lie in Merle's arms again, never to hear him laughing tenderly, to feel his strong fingers beneath her head, never to waken in the flush of early morning with a cheek rough with day-old beard pressed against her shoulder. Never to fuss and scold about shirts thrown down, towels in the bathtub, untidy chiffonier drawers. Never to drive, through the dark night, slumped down against a rough coat sleeve, watching the lights of other cars rush furiously to meet them,

swerve harmlessly by. Never any more the sound of his car in the driveway late at night, the mingled masculine fragrance of tobacco and toilet water in her nostrils.

Nothing could fill this emptiness. She was a wife, without a husband. She was afraid suddenly that she might make a fool of herself, that she might fall in love with some boy like Harley, some man younger than, or inferior to herself, give herself recklessly, jeopardize her future. She stopped in her walking and thought of Susan Fowler with fresh realization, fresh pity, thought of that other wife, younger and fairer than Jenny was now. No wonder she had sought an anodyne. No wonder she had read through the sleepless nights.

And her father in prison, knowing that his wife was alive and young, waiting and weeping for him. Had her mother then, at the end, looked down and seen herself, as Dunny had suggested? Or was it that she could not bear to renew the heartache, the peril of love, after long inhibition? Or had she been unhappy in her marriage, and fearful of its renewal? It was a riddle Jenny could not read, but she could mourn again for her mother.

She, Jenny Ferguson, would not accept any makeshift. She would not drug herself through the days and nights with the delicate balance of distracted attention. All of this time her thoughts had been centered on the past, on her mourning. She had dwelt on what was lost, the old companionship, the old love, and the pleasure she and Merle had had in their life together. She had felt that she was robbed a thousandfold more than Marian, who had never known possession. But now she faced the years ahead, the empty stretching years. If one's

vitality could ebb—if the longing for love could pass away . . .

She did not want to love any man but Merle. It seemed to her, now that she realized herself capable of feeling the same response to some other man, that it would be degrading. Their marriage could no longer be justified, if she could feel again, for some one else, the fierce heart-beat, the longing and weakness she had felt for Merle. She remembered now how her heart had suddenly thickened, in Dunny's office, and the memory terrified her, beyond measure. She drew herself up proudly. She, Jenny Ferguson, would control and dictate the measures of her life. She would not be betrayed by impulse.

God had been good to answer her prayers, she reflected. Now, if she asked, He would free her from this capacity for love. She could become unamorous, if she but prayed to Him. But she did not pray. With all her uncertainty and pain, she could not form such a prayer. She thought, instead, bleakly, of Marian Caruthers, with youth and beauty and empty arms, and nothing—not even a memory to press to her heart in the long night-watches. Jenny was dimly, despairingly afraid. What was going to happen to her? When the boys left home as they would do in a very few years; when Susan was married, what would be left for her? Old age, and emptiness, and grief?

But she would have to be brave. She could not give way, and sink. There was too much to fight for, too much to live for. Just as it had been impossible for her to yield to Molly, so now her courage rose within her, strong and adequate. The thing to ask of God was strength, strength and wisdom, and the ability to take

whatever came—the punishment she had said so boastfully she would bear for Merle. With this thought her being steadied, and a measure of philosophy, of resignation, came to her. Her tears for Merle flowed afresh, but they were healing tears, comforting to her woman's heart. She bathed and lay down at last and slept a little, against the morning.

After that time she threw herself into her work with great determination. The second winter she did well on her job. A phase that she liked extremely, but which she had not anticipated, developed. For many years her life in the town, her contacts with women had been entirely social, superficial. But now they became actual. Mr. Bowen allowed her much scope. She created an informal accessibility about herself. Her natural distinction, combined with her reputation for shrewdness and the sympathetic touch of her widowhood, gave her much dignity and respect from Hilltown women. They came to her, in increasing numbers, at the bank, in trouble, in debt, in anxiety, in triumph. She remembered what Dunny had said, about the seriousness of people, about money. She found that she liked these contacts extremely. Friendships grew out of them. Especially among the girls who worked for their livings. There were girls who were saving for fur coats, paying installments on cars, paying for last year's vacations, and girls out of whose slender checking accounts the family bills were paid, younger brothers and sisters educated. These girls, so much younger than herself, gallant and fresh, unhampered, as she had been, by thoughts of inferiority, took their work as an adventure, a privilege. Jenny was glad that Susan was to grow up in this new world. looked forward to her adventure on a job!

Jenny had a desk outside the grille, where she spent part of every day. A plate with "MRS. FERGUSON" upon it, stood on this desk, but to the town she was, for the most part, Jenny Fowler. Not all of the women who came to the bank went to her, some preferring the cashier or Mr. Bowen, but their numbers increased steadily. Jenny's old experience in the bank was useful to her. The calculating machines, some of the routine, were new, but the essential idea of banking remained unchanged.

Here, to her, Marian Caruthers came every month, deposited her pay check and had it entered in her little bank book. It was a combination savings and checking account, with a substantial balance. Marian was always pleasant and agreeable to Jenny, and Jenny felt drawn to her as of old, but she controlled this attraction. She noticed that Marian appeared much the same as she had ten years ago, when Merle had spoken of her as faded. She was not bad-looking, for a woman in her early forties, for she had still the essentials of her beauty. She was somewhat timid but not without dignity. Jenny, finding that Marian had several thousand dollars on deposit, advised her, one day, to buy bonds.

"You ought to make a tax-free investment, Marian. You are paying four per cent. the first of every March on your bank balance. Why don't you buy bonds that will draw that much and be free from taxation?"

"Do you think I should do that, Jenny?" said Marian, looking at her, and added, with charming frankness: "I don't know anything about money or investments, Jenny."

"You don't need to, when you are such a good teacher," said Jenny. "Perhaps it isn't good banking instinct, for me to tell you to buy bonds, instead of let-

ting the money lie on deposit. But I would like to see you save that forty or fifty dollars you are paying out on every thousand you have saved, when you have to pay income tax and tax on your house, as well."

"Will you get the bonds for me?"

"If you will give me an order, yes."

And so it was arranged. Later Marian came and wanted to know what Jenny thought about a farm that a cousin wished her to buy. Jenny made inquiries and advised Marian against the purchase, and her judgment was accepted. Jenny found these transactions very pleasant. She could not help thinking how welcome an evening now and then with Marian, would be, how nice to have a companion for dinner at the hotel, an evening at the movies. Marian, she was sure, would have responded to her. But Jenny realized that she wished to fortify herself against the danger of loneliness, that her impulse toward Marian was selfish, and she suppressed it.

At home, in the evening, when the children studied at the big table in the room that had been her father's, then a day nursery and now a schoolroom, or sitting-room, for the children, Jenny went in and sat with them, with her book or sewing. There was an old couch there, long since moved from the big living-room. She would sit in one end of it and read, and Susan would bring *The Cat that Walked by Itself* and curl up beside Jenny, and Jenny's arm would go around her little daughter, and her work or her own book would be laid instantly aside.

They all talked intimately during these evening hours. The boys boasted of new gym stunts, of their physical prowess, Susan of her teacher's attentions. Susan, Jenny learned, had certain difficulties with her girl friends, which came from her irresponsibility toward them. She

was not true to her chums, Fowler said once, interrupting their talk. Jenny started at this, but Susan denied it hotly. She said the girls only ran after her because of Fowler and Tom. Tom in the rôle of a local sheik was highly amusing to Jenny. Tom still seemed fat, though he was a strong nimble boy. But his face, broader than any of the others, was still babyish. Tom was eleven, now, Susan, nine.

Susan was sewing for dolls. Jenny patiently put small pieces together, showed Susan how to hold the cloth, to guide her stitches. She hunted out old things and gave her daughter beautiful pieces of silk and velvet for doll rags. She saw that the child had a strong sense of color and design. Susan would not be careful with her stitches or patient about finishing things. But she would fix a bit of silk upon the tiny dolls with a definite effect. An inch or two of embroidery silk for a girdle, a tiny frayed cascade—it looked as she wanted it to look.

“I am going to live in Grandmother Fowler’s house and be a dressmaker,” Susan said, and Jenny told her:

“You do not sew carefully enough.”

“Oh,” said Susan, “I’ll get some dumb-bell to sew carefully for me. I’ll cut out the cloth, and make the patterns, and fit them.”

“You will leave me, Susan?”

“Why not, Mother?”

“No reason, sweetheart—it is what you should do.”

“I will never leave you, Muth,” Fowler spoke up, looking at her with his serious dark eyes.

Merle laughed. “He will be the first of all, Mother. He has a girl already.”

Charming, bright hours. But by half past nine they

were all asleep, their clothes laid out for morning, and Jenny prowled restlessly about. She worked at the mending at night, explored the kitchen and picked things up and put them away. She consulted with Mrs. Sims, who was sleepy when the children were, about menus, planned the work. She brought her books up to date and wrote letters, brushed and pressed small trousers and Susan's pleated skirts—anything, everything until weariness compelled her to go to bed and sleep.

The spring dragged wearily, rainingly in. It seemed that winter came back again, and again, and the spring was brief and cold and not happy as other springs had been. And then, without warning, blazing summer was upon them. The valley grew stifling, the earth opened in deep cracks. The young corn withered and turned yellow in the bottoms. When the children ran over the grass, little puffs of dust rose under their feet. The river shrank away from its banks and grew thick and muddy.

Jenny sent Merle and Fowler and Tom all to the woodcraft school, and was thankful that they were on a lake. Mrs. Sims took Susan away for two weeks to a girls' camp. Jenny was glad that they were all on the water, the valley was so burned and drawn with heat. She went ahead with her own work, but she was desolate while Susan and Mrs. Sims were gone.

She had not seen Dunny for a long time. He had been in to see them once or twice in the winter, had remembered them all at Christmas, but she had scarcely seen him now for months. She would have liked to see him, to go to his office, or call and ask him to visit her. She wanted to ask him about the education of the boys.

She felt that they ought to be sent off to fine boys' schools, as Merle had planned for them. But Dunny was as remote as though he lived in another town. She did not even know that he was not away. She could have found out easily enough, but some self-consciousness lay upon her. She could not make any move toward him. One night Harley called her and asked her to drive to the university with him. She refused, but thought, now and then, all evening, that it would have been attractive to go.

The biting poisonous tooth of loneliness pierced deep into her heart, a wound, a sorrow scarcely to be endured.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DUNNY AGAIN

MR. BOWEN stopped at her desk. "Can you stay for a while, Jenny, after we close? I've asked Dunny to come in. I want to talk to both of you about some things."

"Certainly, Mr. Bowen. I'll telephone to Mrs. Sims."

Jenny watched him as he went back to his own office at the front of the bank. His shoulders were thin and stooped. He was showing his age for the first time. She knew he was worried about the condition of the county. It was his contention that no small bank can flourish when the farmers of the community are not prospering. This was a reasonable contention, for three-fourths of their business was with farmers. They were the great borrowers. The bank financed half the agricultural enterprises in the county. It was a place not given to large crop farming, but the rolling hills were especially adapted to fine orchards, and the county was well stocked with Jersey cattle. Apple orchards, sheep raising and dairying were the chief sources of agricultural income.

Everywhere, the ground was parched and dry, the apples were small and knotty, the hay was burned and not worth making. "All signs fail in dry weather," was certainly a proverb for the county then. Again and again the storm-clouds gathered, but the rain faltered and fell elsewhere and did not come down into the hungry fields and the dry stony stream-beds.

Dunny came in before the bank closed and sat talking to Mr. Bowen. Within half an hour after the doors were shut, the boys had balanced their books, and the

cashier and bookkeeper were gone. Jenny wrote her own letters on her typewriter. She finished her correspondence and closed her desk. Mr. Bowen called to her.

Jenny greeted Dunny quietly. He rose and waited for her to be seated beside Mr. Bowen, with a grave nod and word. He seemed a little distraught. His white linen trousers, and white shirt were, as always, immaculate and fresh. He wore a dark blue tie. His hair was brushed back, showing a little gray at the temples. Between his clear brown eyes there were faint marks of frowning, and there were lines about his finely chiseled mouth. He flushed when he spoke to Jenny, the slow difficult color coming into his cheeks and fading again almost at once. Mr. Bowen began to talk to them directly.

"It's this way, Jenny—I've already been telling Durham—there isn't going to be any crop—none at all. The farmers will have to buy hay and corn outside the county to carry their stock through the winter. All these farm notes will need to be renewed, some of them increased. We'll have to carry practically every one another year, unless we foreclose. I'm—well, a little worried. The apples are terrible. If the whole crop was bad we could get some money, but the western apples are unusually good and plentiful. The peaches, as you know, weren't worth picking. There's contagious abortion in the southwest corner of the county, and the prices of hogs are way down. The after-the-war slump has begun, and I'm afraid we'll get it, here in the country, first."

"You don't want to foreclose?" asked Dunny.

Mr. Bowen shook his head.

"There are too many of them," he said. "And they are all discouraged. If we foreclose, they will just move off the farms, and we will find ourselves with abandoned farm lands on our hands. That's what has happened in other counties, south. It's hard to get tenants and make any money from them. The bank doesn't want to go farming, if it can avoid it."

"How much does it amount to?" asked Dunny. "How much of our assets are involved?"

"That's one reason I asked Jenny to stay. I want to do some private figuring, where it will be entirely confidential. I don't want the boys going out with any rumors that might disrupt public confidence. It takes very little sometimes, and now everything is uncertain. None of these notes I have here is due, but it will be a matter of only a few weeks until the men begin to come in, and I want to know just where we are, and what the general policy of the bank is going to be, before that time comes. When fall comes, we won't have the deposits and the notes paid off as we should."

"You can weather it, can't you?"

"Of course," said Mr. Bowen stiffly. "The bank is as sound as it can be. We've been through a lot worse sieges than this. The only trouble is that the county and school board funds have increased so much, since the war. The last examination of the Hilltown Trust Company wasn't good enough, and they aren't a legal depository any more. That throws all the public money to us, which is a fine thing, but it requires us to carry a substantial amount of liquid assets, or else give bond. Mrs. Bowen and I have already signed a repository bond. If we renew all these notes, and increase some of our loans, we'll have to have another."

"I could sign a repository bond," said Jenny, but Dunny said quickly:

"No! No! You're not to do that, Jenny."

"She doesn't need to," said Mr. Bowen, and added, bridling, "Although it wouldn't be a bad thing for her to do. She's here in the bank, and there isn't a possibility in the world of the repository bonds ever being claimed. It's merely a formality."

"Well, she's not to do it," insisted Dunny. "She has those four children, and she's not to think of it."

"I'll sign anything Mr. Bowen wants signed, any time," said Jenny warmly. "He's my friend. He signed things for Merle and me. I'll never forget it, either."

"It isn't necessary, Jenny," said Mr. Bowen. "No one wants you to do it. Dunny can do it when the time comes. He's on the Board."

Jenny felt that Mr. Bowen was growing old, that he was worried and harassed. She was very fond of him. And Dunny's exclamations seemed to have wounded him. She said staunchly:

"Mr. Bowen, you mustn't worry so. The bank is run carefully, and every one has so much confidence in you that this slight difficulty, this one bad year, won't affect you at all. Prices will stay good, and next year the county will recuperate."

"Our bank is sound," he told them. "But the Hill-town Trust isn't. It behooves us to help to steady them, for if the other bank fails, nothing will avert a run on this one. This bank has stood here for fifty years, and for thirty I've managed it. It's been a great problem in time of depression, but our credit is all right. I can always get money from the city. Only now there is so much inflation."

"It's the possibility of a run on the other bank," said Dunny, "or of its failure, which makes me say that Jenny should not sign bonds. Merle would have done it, like a shot, and that would have been all right. But Jenny's problems are different. Let the stockholders, and the bank officials take any needed risks."

Mr. Bowen had had a bookkeeping machine brought into his office, and he produced from a drawer of his desk a sheaf of notes that he had segregated, and they went to work in earnest, Dunny computing the interest and reading off the totals to Jenny, Mr. Bowen checking the dates. It was almost six o'clock when they had finished and had a statement for Mr. Bowen's private consideration. Jenny and Dunny left the bank together, and he walked home with her. The sun hung low in the western sky, a source of fierce destroying heat. The ground, the air, were very dry. The tar on the streets was almost liquid, and sent up a faint, not unpleasant odor in the still air. The lawns were green where the water fountains and revolving sprays fell on them. Dunny moved beside her, his straw hat in his hand. Jenny wore a dress of yellow voile, sleeveless and short, and her thin chiffon stockings and light slippers made an ensemble in which she looked cool and comfortable. Her thick black hair, with the same old ripple in it, was brushed cleanly back from her face, and gathered in a knot at her neck. She was pale and tired and very lovely.

When they reached her home, she said:

"Won't you come in, Dunny? Have supper with us—please do! We'd love to have you. The boys are away. There's just Susan and Mrs. Sims and myself, and the evenings are very long."

He stood for a moment in indecision, then he looked at her helplessly, and there was something in his look which made her redden and smile in odd confusion. Dunny smiled. His face lighted with the charm of it.

"Of course I'll come in. I've wondered if you had forgotten all about me."

They found Susan in a wet bathing suit, just come from the pool at the park with Mrs. Sims. Susan put her arms around Jenny's neck and kissed her.

"We waited until nearly four o'clock for you, Muth," she said. "And then you phoned and we went on alone. But I wished for you."

"We'll all go to-morrow," Jenny promised. "Now run and dress. We've company."

Susan gave her hand to Dunny, with a quaint small dignity. He stooped and pressed his cheek against hers, which was still damp and cool. She ran up-stairs in her bare feet, and Jenny asked Dunny to sit down on the wide front porch, shaded with a Venetian blind on the west end. The reed chairs were comfortable, the porch was cool. A spray on the lawn was refreshingly close. Jenny went into the house and brought out a pitcher of iced fruit juice and tall thin glasses filled with cracked ice. They sipped the cool, brightly colored punch, and Dunny smoked. They talked at first politely, like strangers. Then they fell into a comfortable, relaxed silence, which lasted, with desultory conversation, until Mrs. Sims called them in to the evening meal. Jenny was loath to be disturbed. It seemed that she and Dunny, sitting there so still, not even looking at each other, had been engrossed in a long secret talk.

Jenny always remembered that meal. Dunny was very gay, and like many serious, modest men, when he chose

to be entertaining, he outdid the habitually jolly. Susan was tremendously diverted, and made love to Dunny in her own small bright way, her pansy face crinkling with laughter. There was cold sliced breast of chicken, water-cress salad, thin slices of bread and butter, a jam of grapes and oranges, chilled fruit and iced tea. Jenny forgot how hot the night was, forgot her weariness and loneliness. When they had satisfied their hunger they went back to the porch, and Susan lingered, dawdling against her mother, showing Dunny her small hard palm, for him to read her fortune. He found any number of satisfying things in it, boarding school and midnight suppers, a tall fair boy, in a sailor suit, a dancing frock and slippers with rhinestones in the heels, a snow-white kitten she would receive soon from a mysterious elderly gentleman, a fat pony that could understand all that was said to it.

Susan was entranced. She stood on one foot and leaned so hard against Jenny that she would have fallen if her mother had moved. When it was time for her to go in to Mrs. Sims and go to bed, she kissed her mother good night and whispered to her for a moment, her hand cupped about Jenny's ear. Jenny smiled at Dunny.

"I think he would like it very much," she told her daughter, and Susan went to Dunny and lifted her face very gravely, to kiss him good night. He received the salute in respectful, intelligent silence.

The daylight faded slowly, in a panorama of gorgeous color, and the stars came out in the velvet blackness of a moonless sky. From somewhere a faint breeze stirred at last.

Dunny talked to Jenny about his work, not in the

guarded way he was wont to talk about it, but with frankness and freedom. Judge Lattimer, he told Jenny, was growing old. You couldn't count on him any more. In his efforts to deal fairly and not to be influenced, he was sometimes arbitrary. Lately he had been discriminating against Dunny because it had been said that Dunny won cases in his court because of his connection with the judge's family.

"Edythe's death was a great blow to the judge," Dunny told her. "He never quite got over it. He has a softness and weakness about me. And he knows it. So he is absolutely autocratic with me in court."

"It's very human and, in a way, admirable, for him to feel so."

"Yes, but it isn't really rectitude. It's defiance."

Dunny cited instances for her, and explained the law involved in each case. There was the receivership of a stone company that had failed to pay its labor. Labor claims had to be paid. That was the law. They came first. There were fraudulent contracts involved, which the receiver wanted adjusted prior to any other claim. The judge would not allow any one to sue the receiver. Under such a protective court, a receivership was a fat plum, Dunny explained.

It was good talk—man talk. She was intensely interested in all that he said. She understood it, both the technical parts and the spiritual problems involved. Her mind, long starved, seized on this food, this companionship. And it was evident, too, what pleasure Dunny had from the intimacy, the confidence, the sympathy of their conversation.

They talked about the bank, about her job. He knew, for Mr. Bowen had told him, about the increase in wo-

men's deposits, since Jenny had been there. Mr. Bowen had unbounded faith in Jenny's discretion.

"I'm starting a new thing, now. We're to have 'clubs' for the merchants, Dunny—blanket clubs, and stove clubs, and washing-machine clubs. I handle the collections. The bank pays the merchant cash, at a slight discount on the retail price, and receives the full retail price, plus interest, from the purchaser. A little profit both ways. It's absolutely sound. Small sums are involved, from fifty cents to five dollars a week, from the wives of wage earners. It gives the bank a chance to handle the money of people who do not save or invest. Women are reliable, and they love installments."

"But they are paying more," he protested.

"You can't make them believe it," Jenny assured him. "There are women in Hilltown, as elsewhere, who would rather buy twenty dollars' worth of blankets at fifty cents a week, than pay cash for them. They think they are getting them for nothing. Any one can find fifty cents a week, by some small economy, and there are the blankets, on the beds all winter! No one, they think, really appreciates what they are getting away with."

Dunny was gloomy about installment-plan buying. "There's bound to be a time of great disillusion and readjustment," he prophesied.

Jenny told him not to be pessimistic. As long as there were three pay-rolls in the town, the farm paper, the stone quarry and mill, the lumber mill——

After a while the conversation grew more personal. They talked of Susan, of Jenny's plans for her, a little about the boys.

"James Lattimer is a senior at Culver, Dunny. He's

behind his class—you know, he spent that year in Europe, with a cousin. The boys—my boys—think he is perfect. Have you seen him lately? A tall handsome boy with black eyes? He was here before they all went off to camp. It worries me a little, the intimacy they all enjoy.”

“But why should it? He’s a fine boy—from a fine family.”

Jenny sat in startled silence. She had presumed all this time that Dunny knew as much as she herself knew about James Lattimer. Now she realized that this had been only an assumption. The thought of Molly came back to her strangely, disturbingly. She could remember, with an emotion almost as keen as when it happened, the terrible illness that had come over her spirit when Molly accused her. And nothing had happened. What anti-climax! A great longing came to Jenny to tell Dunny all about that day, and the things that had happened. But she was not sure it was her confidence, to betray. Dunny had been Molly’s lawyer. She had told him what she wished him to know. Let her secrets lie in her grave with her!

The town clock began to boom slowly, and they sat in silence and listened to its strokes. It was twelve o’clock. Dunny rose to go. He had been with Jenny for six hours, and it had seemed only a little while.

“You’ll come again, won’t you, Dunny?”

“But of course! I have to go up north to try a case—but I won’t be gone long, I hope. It’s been a happy interval, for me, Jenny.”

She sat on, wide awake, after he was gone, thinking, remembering many little unimportant things. When she went up-stairs she turned on all the lights and looked at

herself a long time in the mirror. She looked all of forty, she decided. Well, why not? She was forty-two! It was not that her face was much lined. She had no double chin, no furrows. Her brow was smooth, her skin fresh and firm, clear and full of tone. But there was a difference in her throat. It was becoming thin again, as it had been when she was a girl. And her eyes were sad and wise, her lips pressed firmly together. The struggles she had had with herself had left their marks upon her. It was in her expression, her acceptance of difficulties, that she showed her age. She was not young, nor beautiful, she decided. But Dunny was in the prime of life. She turned away from the mirror, insensible of the depth of charm that lay in her broad comely face, her mysterious, wistful dark eyes, her troubled mouth.

After that first time Dunny did not come again for several weeks. There had come, the next day, by special messenger, a fat white kitten, with a wide blue bow, for Susan. Jenny fell into a strange lassitude. The hot dry weather held on until almost the first of September. The boys came back from camp. Jenny regretted that she had not talked to Dunny about the boys when she had the opportunity, but she had been reluctant to make use of his visit. The boys were so brown and healthy, so grown and full of wild animal spirits, that they wearied her a little.

Tom had won a badge for swimming. Fowler had made the acquaintance of a young professor who had awakened in him a great interest in the physical sciences. He wanted to be a scientist now, he told his mother. The fascinating mysteries of zoology had been revealed to him. Jenny considered sending him away to school.

The Hilltown school had, perforce, limited scientific and laboratory equipment. And she could send Fowler on the interest of his own inheritance. Fowler knew exactly the school he wanted, in the East, a school especially reputed for scientific investigation and training.

But she felt the need of Merle's or Dunny's advice. Young Merle had obtained a promise that he would be admitted at Culver on his old application, if he could come in, for his junior year. He would be conditioned in mathematics and military science. He might not graduate for three years, but if he would let the recorder's office know at once——

He was wild to go. Jenny saw that the boys had a certain entrée due to Merle's political distinction. James Lattimer had finished at Culver and was going to the university. He came to the house more than once, a very tall thin young man with charming manners. Jenny was not over-cordial to him, but he didn't know it. He gave Susan a basket for her cat, which he had used for a pet of his, now dead. He was the big boy, the idol, of the crowd younger than himself.

Fowler coaxed and tormented her constantly. And Merle insisted that if Fowler went east he was to go to Culver. Tom, too, wanted to go to Culver, if Merle went, but Jenny settled that. He would be home for another year or two. Jenny admitted that she could not make a distinction between the older boys. There was no use, they told her, in sticking around this dead town. Daddy had meant for them to go away to school! He had often talked of it.

But she could not decide. Their strong wills, their unrelenting persistence, only increased her confusion. She seemed in the grip of helplessness, so little like her

usual firm character that it was distressing in itself. If the boys were away at school—— But she could not imagine how that would be, either, with just Susan and Mrs. Sims at home.

One of the boys at the bank called her to the telephone the Saturday before Labor Day. It was Dunny on the wire.

"I'm going to Stone City on business, Jenny," he said. "Could you go with me? It won't take me half an hour to do what I have to do up there, and then I thought we might have dinner at the new hotel. What do you think?" and he added, before she could reply, "I was up in the northern part of the state longer than I expected, and had to go to the capital as soon as I got back. I've been in court every day and working at night——"

"How soon are you leaving?"

"In about thirty minutes. Sorry not to give you more time. I had it in my mind to call on you to-night, but I just had a long-distance phone message making it necessary for me to go."

"I'll be ready—at home," she said. She telephoned to Merle to bring the car down for her. She made it a rule to walk back and forth every day, as Merle had done, for her health's sake. But to-day she had no time to waste. Arrived at home she got into the tub, and out again, wrapped a negligée about herself and brushed her hair, cold-creamed and massaged her face, considered a small amount of make-up carefully. She looked over her clothes and chose a thin dress of gray and black chiffon, which had long sleeves with a charming effect at the wrist. She laid out black chiffon stockings, slippers with silver buckles, a close black satin hat, with a

jet ornament across the front of it. A scarf of tipped fox, a beautiful piece—Merle's last gift to her—a plain black broadcloth coat, silver-gray kid gloves and a black purse. She had some amethysts in old-fashioned silver settings, which had belonged to Merle's mother. They were in good style again now, and she wore them. She took a last look in the mirror, added a little more color to her lips and, her cloak on her arm, went down to the door to greet Dunny. She was deeply excited. It was two years since she had gone anywhere. Her life had been bound by the strictest routine, home and the bank, the children and Mrs. Sims, Nellie and Mr. Bowen, and her customers.

Dunny talked to her with an eager rush of words as they drove to Stone City. She listened, smiling, the color rising and flooding her face, and ebbing away again. She was resolved to subdue this girlish, this unsophisticated flutter. She was being absurd, she told herself severely. But her poise was perfect, her excitement invisible.

At dinner she was more natural. It was not so novel to sit across the table from Dunny. She told him her problems with the boys. He advised her, considering his words carefully, to send the two older boys away to school. He thought it would be good to separate them, for a year or two, anyhow. They would come together again in the university. By that time they would have outgrown and forgotten their rivalry. And they needed, now, definite, masculine authority over them. They were growing big, and their wills were strong. She could not expect to cope with them, alone. Fowler, especially, would respond to a new environment. He was thirteen now and very tall. Let him enter this

preparatory school, if not as a junior, as a sophomore, and let Merle go to Culver. His was a temperament ideally suited for the environment of a military school.

"You do understand my problems, Dunny."

He should, he replied. He had known the boys from infancy. She reflected that he knew all of her affairs, all of her life. She did not tell him that the fact that Fowler had written to Marian Caruthers all summer, had talked to her about his schooling and obtained her approval with which he tried to argue his mother into submission—that this fact made her wish, especially, to send Fowler away from the Hilltown schools. She knew this was unworthy. She was ashamed of it. But Fowler, she argued, was so easily influenced, Marian so inexperienced of the world.

She made no effort to charm Dunny. They knew each other too well. But there was in her a deep wine of happiness which made effort superfluous, anyhow. The timbre of her voice, the glance of her eyes were seductive. She felt pride in Dunny, in his appearance, his distinction. Many people in the big hotel came to their table and spoke to him. The men looked at her with admiration. Some of them, whom she could not remember at all, knew her. She liked Dunny's gentle persistent courtesy, the kindness and warmth of his voice, the poise and strength of character behind all that he did and said. The essence of the man was fine and deeply charming. She had never noticed his hands before. They were long, not bony and large as Merle's had been, but fine-boned, supple and strong. There was refinement in them, a restrained and authoritative masculinity. Jenny felt, looking at Dunny's hands, that it would be impossible for him to do a base or a vulgar thing.

"It's hard to let the boys go," she told him, "but I have always thought I would be steadfast when the time came and not hold them. Particularly since Merle died, have I warned myself against the dangers of hanging on to them. Merle will be fifteen next month. Fowler was thirteen last April. If they go, they'll never be at home again. That's what it amounts to."

They sat watching some young people dancing, but did not venture out on the floor. Jenny was content to watch. Dunny's cigarette smoke had a fragrance very attractive to her. She told him she thought she would learn to smoke, and he smiled a little, not answering, as though he did not believe she would.

At eight o'clock they had finished dinner, and Dunny proposed that they drive home through Brown County.

"There's a wonderful moon," he said, "the harvest moon. The new road is open. It will take about three hours to drive it. What do you think, Jenny?"

She thought it very attractive. His car was a coupé, a new car, with an expensive high-powered engine. He opened the windows and raised the wind-shield an inch or two. Jenny drew her wrap around her and sat beside him, watching the ragged countryside flooded by the light of the great moon. She thought of the difference between Merle's and Dunny's driving. Merle drove right along at a steady clip, taking his corners without diminution of speed, talking and thinking, smoking and knocking his ashes about, planning for what he would do when he reached his destination, driving between forty and fifty miles an hour, a good driver, not afraid to use his brakes, to wear out his car, unconscious entirely of any noise or vibration in the car, or dust and mud outside of it, as long as it would go.

But Dunny's car was clean and polished, and absolutely silent, except for the purr of the engine. He told her that he had had a mechanic hunt for two weeks for a body creak, before he found it. He drove amazingly fast, on the long level stretches of road, the speedometer going around to seventy—to seventy-five—a breathless speed, with the night rushing and whirling away behind them. The car, like a winged thing, effortless, powered by magic, flew along the road without strain or vibration, but with an increasing subdued thunder under the hood.

In the towns he drove within the speed limit, with alert care. He took his corners on the right side of the road. He was meticulously careful about the rights of other drivers. And the driving absorbed him. He had little to say, enjoying the control of the wheel, feeling the full savor of it as a separate delight, not as a means of covering distance.

"I'm surprised that you drive as fast as you do, Dunny," she said to him once, as they slowed for a bridge after a long thundering run up a hill and down it again.

He laughed a little. "My eyes are good," he assured her. "It's an outlet for me. Practically the only one I have. I believe I'd like to learn flying. Only it doesn't seem practical yet."

She pictured his life, spent between the activities of his practise and his empty house, all day, and often at night, trying to straighten out other men's affairs, his own unchanged, unchallenged, from year to year.

His car meant something almost animate to him. She told him this, and he was pleased at her understanding.

"Everything has a meaning of its own to me," he said. "I can not throw a book down, destroy a beautiful piece

of printing, if it is only an advertisement. It lies in my hand, binding and print, as a thing with identity, being. It seems to me that the wrecking of a car, or the burning of a house—any destruction—is horrible, aside entirely from the financial loss involved. I feel as though, some day, we'll learn to avoid waste and decadence. Haven't you ever felt, about a beautiful pattern, or design, or some intricate skilled work, that it should be an eternal conception, Jenny?"

She listened to him, to his thoughts—to the ideas that had formed in his keen mind, through the years. Eventually, they were both silent. Jenny did not stir. She was completely relaxed, her body swaying with the car. On a long inside curve she was thrown against Dunny, pressing deeply against his arm and the upholstering behind her. When the road straightened and the car swung back, she did not move, but lay there held by invisible bonds of attraction. It was with regret which she felt he shared that they reached the river road, the lights of the home town, the bridge and the length of Main Street, the corner and the great tree and home. Dunny stopped the car smoothly, and they sat for a moment in the same charmed silence in which they had driven many miles of perfect exhilarating motion through the autumn night. Jenny sighed unconsciously, and they laughed a little softly.

"What are you going to do Labor Day, Jenny?"

"The children have planned a picnic. Will you join us?"

"Why, yes, if they won't mind. And in the evening, will you ride with me again?"

"I'll have a great many things to do, if the boys are going away, telegrams to get off, and clothes and shoes

and luggage to look after. Do you think I'll have any trouble getting Fowler admitted?"

"I can do that for you," he said. "I'll put in a long-distance call in the morning to a friend of mine who is a graduate of that school. He was in law school with me. He has a great deal of influence—he has endowed a chair, or something. I'll call you to-morrow and tell you what luck I have."

"How kind you are, Dunny. About nine o'clock, then, Monday night? That will give me some time with the boys, before we go."

"When is the picnic to take place?"

"I'll tell you when you call me to-morrow."

Fowler spoiled the picnic. He had always held Dunny to be the finest man he knew. He had always confided in him, trusted him. But now, with the instability of his temperament, and with a precocious instinct, he turned against him. On the Labor Day picnic he was sullen and unruly, eaten with a jealousy he did not understand. He would not answer when Dunny spoke to him, and turned his head away. Jenny took him aside at last, her patience worn thin.

"You are humiliating me, Fowler," she said. "What makes you act this way? Dunny has always been good to you."

He looked her full in the face scornfully.

"Making love!" he said contemptuously. "The two of you!"

Jenny's face flamed scarlet. Her mouth set with anger.

"Do you realize you are not too big for a whipping?" she said. "I'll have no such impertinence from you! When I need you to advise as to my conduct, it will be a sorry day."

“So I think!”

She paused, panting a little, trying to still her heart. The dark face before her was so brooding and unhappy that she melted and caught him to her. She kissed his cheek, held him hard against her heart. He was so tall—he reached her shoulder—so thin—he seemed very young.

“Fowler,” she said brokenly, “you must never forsake me. Of all the children—you are the one——” She stopped. She had never allowed herself to voice such a thought—even to have it. She said more gently, “There are things you are too young to understand—to judge. I want you to trust me to do what is right and honorable.”

“I hate him!” he said inflexibly. “I could kill him!”

The words, the tone, the brooding fierce look were her father’s. His voice, breaking as he spoke, was Ian Fowler’s voice. Jenny said wildly, frightened half out of her senses. “Never let me hear you use that word again! Fowler! If you ever speak that word again——”

His anger was as wild as her own. He drew away from her roughly, and she struck him. The blow was hard, directly across his mouth. He threw his hand up to his face and cried out, and Jenny began to weep. The others were down below at the falls, wading in the water, calling and laughing. Jenny sat down on a stone near the wood-path and gathered Fowler into her arms, and they were reconciled to each other. She wondered what he knew about his grandfather. Some one would tell him. There would be some one unkind enough to tell the boy. Perhaps she had better tell him herself. Now, she must send him away, put him in charge of wise and honorable masters, away from the influence and care of women.

"I can't go with you to-night," she said to Dunny. "Later, when the boys are gone, I will be free. I'm sorry, Dunny."

He was moody and made no answer. She felt that he was hurt, alienated, perhaps, at being relegated to their convenience. She wondered if he could know how much a sacrifice it was for her to give up the ride they had planned. He was quick enough! Fowler's fierce jealousy could not have been lost on him.

Merle left for school on Wednesday, Fowler on Thursday. That night Jenny and Dunny drove to Stone City again and home the long way. Friday evening, Saturday evening, all Sunday afternoon, and Sunday evening, they were together,

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SECOND LOVE

JENNY was in love again.

Recklessly she threw herself into the rapidly increasing intimacy with Dunny. She was a woman now, mature, acquainted with passion, vital, affectionate, experienced; strong and wilful of temperament as ever, more discriminating and appreciative than she had been as a girl, and with a greater capacity for feeling. She seemed to bloom again. There was in her voice and in her smile a beguilement greater than she had ever possessed in her youth. Every one felt it. People were drawn to her without volition. The work at the bank went with swift smoothness. At home, Tom and Susan hung about her; Mrs. Sims watched with affection, waiting, smiling. Neighbors and friends were interested and alert, recalling the old story. There was no back-stair romance this time. Dunny came and went boldly by the front door. His car was parked before her house or in her driveway, hours on end. He sent her flowers, called her on long distance when he was away.

Her sense of penury left her. She replenished her wardrobe with a lavish hand. She had never gone into definite mourning for Merle, as the war had abolished that for every one, but she had chosen somber things to suit her mood, had, in reality, bought little for two years. But now, the flowers and brilliant hues of the shops at Stone City and the capital were hers for the asking. Prices were still war-high. Jenny paid every cent of Fowler's expenses from Molly's money, which she had never touched before. She paid for Merle's schooling,

out of hand. What if she had to cash a bond or two to send the boys to college? She would have only herself to consider, later. She got some new things for the house, bought cut flowers for the living-room, prepared many a lovely extravagant meal for Dunny's pleasure.

They were together two or three evenings a week, and often the whole day Sunday was passed together at her house, or on trips with Susan in the car with them. They drove to the state capital to go to the theater, to Stone City for dinner and movies, to the university for the concerts there. They sat by Jenny's fire as October grew late and talked and talked.

Dunny, too, seemed revitalized. He laughed and smiled more than any one had ever known him to do. There was an air about him, who had always been so quiet, so repressed. He brought gifts to Jenny and Susan, to Mrs. Sims and Tom. Merle had never given Jenny any present, unless it was Christmas or her birthday. But Dunny had something in his pocket for her almost every time he came, some of the gifts extravagant, others only interesting or odd.

He had a client who was a Chinese, and who had great admiration for Dunny. He brought her, from him, a mandarin house coat, a porcelain vase, which, the Oriental explained, she would not appreciate until she had lived in the same house with it for a year. He brought her some little figures in jade, carved gold and ivory beads, a box of tea, with the whole leaves tied into small fagots. There was a French doll for Susan, a crystal jar of perfume for Jenny, a platinum wrist-watch to replace the one she broke against the steering-wheel of his car.

Jenny had never been wooed before. She had never been courted, beguiled, attended. A new poise and sweetness came to her with Dunny's attentions. She marveled to see how humble she had been with Merle, grateful for his respect, for his kindness and fidelity, not asking to be understood, or persuaded, without any of the sweet arrogance that was the feminine privilege.

Only one thing marred her happiness, and that was Fowler. The reconciliation between them had been of brief duration. After the telegram announcing his safe arrival at school, he had not written to her, had not answered any of her letters until, filled with anxiety, she had wired to the head master. After that he wrote to her bitterly.

I didn't think you'd care to hear from me. You have plenty of company now. Merle and I can take care of ourselves. If I get sick or run away from school, they will tell you, so don't worry. I am studying hard and like my teachers. I am O. K. Yours—Fowler.

What a letter! She was hungry to know every detail of his school life. She must do something about this! He and Merle would take care of "themselves"! They had always teased him about that word, and he had never remembered. Merle wrote to her, long and satisfying letters, twice a week, and she had talked to him by long distance once since he was gone. She wrote to Fowler tenderly, but he did not answer. She wrote, then, informing him that she would bring him home from school if he did not write to her at least once a week. After that there came every Tuesday, a dull report, written on Sunday afternoon. Now and then there was a little glimpse of eagerness, the word "swell"—a reference to

hockey, as though he would have liked to tell her things, but it was never more than a flash. She was deeply concerned about him. He was far too young to lose the contact with his family, the love and guidance of parents. If Merle had lived, this condition would never have come upon her. Her heart ached over Fowler. She sensed that he was unhappy, that he was in a dangerous state of mind. He might now, at thirteen, suffer some definite injury to his character, his habits of thought and affection. But she did not know what to do, except wait in patience. She was not sure that it would be wise to bring him home. She could not tactfully discuss this problem with Dunny. She could not believe that one of her own children could turn against her irrevocably.

The fall business in the bank proved to be as bad as Mr. Bowen had predicted. Late thunderstorms and heavy smashing rains drowned out the last possibility of a crop. One day, talking things over with her, Mr. Bowen said that he would have to ask Dunny to sign a repository bond, as no one else connected with the bank had enough money to do it. Jenny, who had not forgotten her own words, the day this had first been mentioned, immediately offered to do it, insisted it was her privilege. Mrs. Bowen, the banker explained, was already on a bond. But they had had a bad fire at the stone mill which was her private property. The School Board and County Board had to have new bonds this year. Jenny signed, before a notary, a county bond for sixty thousand dollars, and listed as security the bonds Merle had purchased for her when he sold the paper at Stone City. She did not speak of this to any one, partly because she thought little of it, partly because she considered it

her own affair. She knew Dunny would scold. But it was fine to do something for Mr. Bowen. He was a symbol to Jenny. And she had great confidence in the bank, in its manager's integrity and ability.

The fall was gorgeous. The Indian summer lingered long, with sunsets of great brilliance, with frosty nights and days of deceptive softness and warmth. Dunny did not speak. He said nothing to Jenny further than he had said for years. Beyond the ordinary hand-clasp of greeting he did not touch her. Yet a great emotion lay between them.

Jenny, wondering a little, divined intuitively that it was not easy for him to give way to her, after all these years and all that lay behind. He was not an impulsive man. The problems of marriage with Jenny, with her four children, and one of them already alienated by jealousy, were great. He had much to remember, much to forgive. She knew he had never borne her resentment, never been proud with her. But until, in his heart, he was sure of her, sure against risk of hurt again, he would wait. She wondered how her life would have been, if she could have loved him as a girl. That was idle thinking. She had not thought or felt like this before. She had, in fact, never felt this way about Merle, let alone Dunny as a boy.

One night he stayed very late, talking to her intimately about his work. She knew all the details of his large practise, knew what he expected in each case, what the law was, for and against him. He talked to Jenny without reserve, giving her the confidences a man gives his wife.

Finally he looked all around the room, and said to her:

"Will you hate it much—leaving your house, Jenny?"

She was startled. The color came up into her cheeks, and he said, with difficulty, slowly and falteringly:

"I thought—at Christmas, when the boys are home, we might move over to the other house—the Kent house."

"I've never thought about leaving this house," she said in confusion.

"You wouldn't want me to come here. My house is bigger, better for all of us. After all, that would be best—I think."

"Of course it would," she said, trembling. How strange he was! She had not really thought of anything except that he would come to her here. But that had been stupid of her. Of course he would not want to come here, to the home she and Merle had made. But they had never talked of marriage—of love. She sat still, a little dissatisfied with his avowal, hardly knowing how to go on. And then her heart began to beat as it had that day in his office, that spring two years ago, with great, strong, thickening strokes.

She was sitting in one end of the great couch, and Dunny was sitting on a small bench before the fire. Rising, he came over and stood before her. She could scarcely lift her eyes to the blaze in his. But he was smiling down at her gently. The wonder, the strength, the perfection of him came to her in that moment like a revelation. He was a great, a good man, deep and strong and true.

He stooped a little, and pressed her back against the upholstery of the couch, so that he could look into her face, and he searched her eyes. His hand lay on her shoulder. He grew stern. Some vital issue lay between them now. His smile faded, and his face seemed for

a moment desperately unhappy. He had looked like this—haggard and worn—after his little daughter died, and they had talked together. He said, half in a whisper:

“Are you sure, Jenny? Sure that you love me? That you don’t just—need me? Forgive me, but I’ve got to know. You wouldn’t marry—anyhow, would you? You’re sure—this time?”

Her eyes filled with tears. She drew him down, but he did not touch her lips.

His cheek to hers, he said: “You know—no matter what you did to me—I would have to forgive it. It isn’t that—but I want you to tell me—yourself!”

The words were torn from her.

“Better than any one”—she panted—“better than all. Better than the world—or my life—or anything, Dunny. Believe me—I love you. I never loved like this—before. I think I’ve loved you for years, and didn’t know it. You’ve always had your place—but I wasn’t ready for—this—when I was a girl. We had to wait, until I could learn—to know what love is—Dunny.”

“I can’t take second place,” he said to her, and his low voice shook with his desire, the conflict of his longing for realization and his fear of pain. “I’ve got to have everything, Jenny. I want you to love your children. I will never come between you and them—I will love them and shelter them as though they were mine. But you mustn’t put them before me. That night, at the picnic, you let Fowler rule you.”

“When I was a girl,” she whispered, “I wanted a boy, and you were a man, then. You’re the finest person in all the world, Dunny, and my soul does honor to you. I love you.”

"I am compelled by my own desire, to believe you," he said softly.

His cheek was pressed to hers. She turned her head so that the corner of her mouth touched the corner of his. Instantly he had her close in his arms, her mouth locked beneath his own. They clung together. The house was still about them, the town was quiet and silent, outside her windows. Jenny felt a wide ungovernable tide of love fill and overflow her being. This was the thunderbolt, this the great moment of her life. Dunny lifted his head at last.

"Ah, Jenny, you do love me," he whispered.

They smiled at each other dimly. Gently he drew her arms down from his neck and stood away from her. He found his own hat and coat and put them on. She sat still, her eyes bright with tears, her cheeks wet and burning red. He came back and took her hands and drew her to her feet and kissed her again, gently, as he might have kissed Susan.

"It is six weeks until Christmas," he said, and touched her cheek with the back of his fingers, as he had once before, so long ago.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE NEW MARRIAGE

THE new marriage was different in many ways.

It was different from the beginning. There was a small, informal, carefully planned wedding. There was the approval and knowledge of the community. Engraved announcements were broadcast, the list including the finest names up and down the state.

The young new Presbyterian minister married them. Jenny's house was beautiful with flowers, with Christmas holly and poinsettia. Jenny's four children, spick and span in new clothes, purchased for the occasion, Mrs. Sims, Dunny's partner and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Bowen, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, Judge and Mrs. Lattimer, the minister and his young wife, one or two others, were present. When the guests were all assembled Jenny came down-stairs. She and Dunny and Mr. Oliphant stood by the fireplace. When the marriage ceremony was pronounced, Dunny put on her hand, where the blue veins were beginning to show just a little, the platinum band to match the diamond cluster he had given her some weeks before. The ring did not quite cover the white place on her finger, from which Merle's gold band had been removed. The old ring was in a little box, put away for Susan.

They were married at six o'clock, on Christmas night, and afterward there was a wedding supper and gifts for every one. The children had had their Christmas tree the night before, alone with Jenny and Dunny. At nine o'clock the newly married couple went off in Dunny's coupé, to be gone a week. Mrs. Sims saw the boys off to school, after the children had had a

party which included practically all the young people in Hilltown.

Merle was proud of his new father, interested and pleased about the wedding, given to a little bragging about Dunny. Tom and Susan were openly thrilled and excited, and anticipated the move to the big house—Hilltown's traditional great place—with all the zest with which children usually greet a moving.

At the wedding Fowler was white and silent, tragic, making no effort to hide it, although he was self-contained. He was gentlemanly. He had come home from school changed, more controlled, more orderly, his manners, his very voice, much improved, but he was remote from them. He was very tall for his age, and Jenny noticed his ability to dramatize his sufferings with a mixture of compassion and amusement.

But she knew, with a pang of terror, that she had lost him. She was, his attitude declared to her, only a nice lady of whom he had once been fond, but who had betrayed him. It was up to him, as a man of the world, and a rising young scientist, to do nothing that might make her unhappy. This was broken a little when he kissed her good-by, and one hard boy's hand bit deep into her arm, one uncontrollable sob escaped him. Jenny promised herself that she would have him back again next summer. He would get accustomed to the idea of her marriage. He was only a little boy. His love for Dunny would become normal. She must not take him too seriously.

So she lied to her anxious unbelieving heart and went off with Dunny on her wedding trip. They went to French Lick, played golf in the cold morning air, with heavy gloves on their hands, rode horseback and motored

and walked, dined and danced in the great hotel, gambled and watched the gambling at night. Jenny was wise as a serpent, harmless and gentle as a dove. The understanding, the sympathy, the love between them increased immeasurably, with the sense of completion, of reality, the finality of marriage.

They talked all night. Everything—all the old thoughts, all the heart-aches, the longings. He confessed to her that on the day of Merle's death, when she stood in the hall, so white and frightened, his love for her had been reawakened, if it had ever been entirely dormant. His heart had fixed upon the thought of having her—yet. But he had fought it down, ashamed of it. He had told himself that it was Merle she would love, always, that she could not change, that it was not to be. But the sense that she was there in the world, that she was free, was a constant barb to him. He felt that she knew that he loved her. If she would show him some kindness . . . He found her entirely innocent and child-like with him. And then he saw her strong and independent again, the victor in some struggle, saw her gaining her own freedom from her marriage, something he could never have given to her—saw her with her face firm and contented, with the sweetness of health and labor on her.

She told him many things about her life—her mother's silver brooch, things from her childhood, dark thoughts and fears. She had never talked so to any one in her life—the words and sentences flowing, the surcease, the bliss of unrestraint. She told him how she had prayed for her children, told him about Fowler. Only one thing was unspoken. Neither of them said a word that could be in any way a reproach or a

comparison upon Edythe or Merle. Nor did Jenny tell him about Molly and her son, feeling that she could not be ungallant enough to cast any shadow on Edythe's family. Let Molly's secrets lie in her grave with her. She could be generous to Molly now.

He was understanding about Fowler. He had seen it all. He would help her to bring the boy around. Fowler's financial independence, he pointed out, should work to their advantage, and they could appeal to his sporting instincts, show him that there was no expediency involved in his love for them.

They came home on New Year's Day, rested and content. They went directly to Dunny's home, where Nellie and Mrs. Sims and the children waited for them. Everything had been carefully planned beforehand. Mrs. Sims and Nellie had moved all of their personal possessions, clothes, toys and other private property into the big house. Dunny had pensioned his mother's old negress, and Nellie and Mrs. Sims had charge. The rest of Jenny's things were to be moved into Susan's house which would be rented furnished, and the house she and Merle had lived in, and from which he had been buried, was to be offered for sale.

It was harder than she had anticipated to dismantle her home. It was in this matter that she found her new marriage so different, found her hardest adjustment had to be made.

The Kent house was Dunny's. The old house had been her own.

The new marriage was Dunny's. The old marriage had been hers.

She had bought everything that was in the house where she and Merle had lived. She had had her own

way completely. Merle had not cared at all whether she bought red drapes or green, furnished the house in walnut or cherry, covered the floors with Oriental rugs or domestic carpets. It was all one to him. But here the treasures came down from half a dozen generations of Kents; the rosewood table in the drawing-room, the books that lined the library walls, the mahogany and green velvet colonial settee, the Duncan Phyfe dining-room table, black and beautiful with age and much rubbing, the flawless cherry four-poster and the cherry chest in the room that would be Susan's, more valuable now than the mahogany because more definitely local and rarer. They had found, those first old cabinet-makers, along the Wabash and in the old river towns, that cherry could be made almost as fine as mahogany, and it was easier to obtain in the southern middle states. Susan was in love with her room and her things, and affected by them at once.

Jenny was not over-enthusiastic about American antiques. She thought the new furniture and the modern lines satisfying. But here were museum pieces. The house, which had seemed surely the grandest in the world to her when she was a little girl, now presented certain real difficulties of housekeeping. It would have been senseless to change it, for it was very beautiful, and many of the things in it could not be replaced by anything half as good. And Dunny was proud of it. But Jenny felt a certain nostalgia which even her deepening love for Dunny could not mitigate.

Certain changes she insisted on making. She brought with her not only her mother's small table and her few treasures, her glass and silverware, but she brought too her electric refrigerator and electric range, her cabinets

and cupboards and cooking utensils. Nellie had been trained by Jenny in a different school from the old colored woman who had cooked for the Kents. The windows in the kitchen were enlarged, a new floor laid to bring the kitchen level with the dining-room and pantry and save a constant stepping up and down, and it was made as compact and modern as the kitchen of a new apartment. It was an anachronism, in the house, but Jenny took much pride and pleasure in it.

There was a suite across the front of the second floor, a bedroom, bathroom and sitting-room, or study, and adjoining this was the old nursery. On this floor, Mrs. Sims had her room, and Susan hers. The third floor covered only part of the house, but there were three bedrooms up there, and a common hall or sitting-room. This part of the house was set aside for Jenny's three sons, and furnished comfortably and suitably for them.

She saw that she must learn to serve and love Dunny in a way new to her. He needed no looking after, financially, no advice or counsel in his profession. His comforts, his refinement, his standards were already high. He had lived many years without mothering, and did not particularly want it now. It was necessary to her to feel that she was of use, that her life filled a practical place and service. But she did not, at once, know what there was for her to do here. It was very strange to think that though she and Dunny loved each other far more deeply and more beautifully than she and Merle had loved, she was not essential to Dunny, as she had been to Merle. He wanted from her love, companionship, understanding. But she had too much vitality and power of her own to be able to sit and wait for his coming and going. So she busied herself with the house-

hold, with her two children, took up again the lines of social communication in the town life, began, carefully and not without some misgivings, to organize her own affairs.

She found that Dunny's eyes were giving him some trouble. The long endless reading of fine print, the late work at night, had bothered him lately. She pounced upon this chance to do something practical for him. Within a month or so of their return he had, scarcely knowing how it was begun, fallen into the way of bringing books home from his office. At night, in the up-stairs study, which they both liked better than the library below, she read aloud to him, page after page, hour after hour, and he made notes, sat listening to her low pleasant voice, with pleasure and profit. This was Jenny's idea of marriage, and Dunny began to have a new understanding, not so romantic, but more authoritative, of her love, her gifts, her unstinting pouring out of herself.

She was a slave to love. She struggled against her abjectness. When Dunny was busy, preoccupied, she felt a chill of loneliness. Always proud, and always independent, she did not like to be so completely in thrall to him. She felt, as the weeks passed and she knew him more completely, that he kept a little piece of himself away from her. Something—she could not define it. His control was greater than her own, he was more definite, surer, his mind was quicker. In her other marriage, she saw now, she had been dominant. But she was not dominant with Dunny. Just as he had brought her gifts, which Merle never thought of, so he was interested in all her affairs, as Merle had never been. Merle would ask, "Can we afford this, Jenny?" "Do you think we

had better?" But Dunny, instead, made suggestions, voiced opinions, unconsciously ordered and arranged.

The standard of living was higher. Insensibly Susan and Tom ate with nicer manners, spoke in softer voices, moved more calmly. The great yard was free for them. Dunny and Susan planned a tennis court to be made in the spring. He wanted them to be happy, with a great desire, and he denied them nothing. But he thought Tom had a careless way of speaking to Jenny, not sufficiently respectful, and said so. The family was all together, Mrs. Sims included (her position in the household would, by now, have been hard to define), at morning and noon, but the children had an early supper with Mrs. Sims, and Jenny and Dunny dined alone, or with guests, an hour or so later. The old dining-room haste and familiarity, the struggles with homework about the table in the old play-room, the doll buggies and roller-skates and baseball bats in the hall, were a phase of Jenny's life now passed for ever.

When her common sense told her to go on about her affairs, to be as casual with Dunny as she had been with Merle, she could not easily do it. She missed her work at the bank, missed her older sons more than she had when she was working. Dunny wished to entertain, and they had house guests from far and near, had dinners as elaborate as the standards of the town would permit without ostentation. Dunny was appreciative of her exquisite management, the smoothness and comfort of the house. Jenny left the mending now to Mrs. Sims, and left Susan much in her care, but every detail here, as in the old life, went through her hands. She could never be careless or wasteful, however much money she had. She had an allowance now for the house, and an allow-

ance for herself and her own bank-account. Dunny deposited to her credit twice a month. But before, she had had it all to handle, to control. She did not know, and never asked, the amount of Dunny's income.

How strange that, though Merle had been far more careless and indifferent to her than Dunny was, he had been more completely her own! Perhaps, she thought wisely, this was because there was not so much to Merle. But as the winter fell behind them, she was increasingly conscious of the presence of some reserve in Dunny. She resisted the desire for possession. This marriage would not be built in a day. She must learn, now, in her middle life, a whole new way of thinking and feeling. Yet it wasn't fair, her heart cried, when she was so completely his, when every thought, every heart-beat, was for him, that he should not surrender himself as she did. She told herself then, sorrowfully, that Dunny had reason to fear the intensity and the instability of her love.

One night when they were driving home from the state capital, she said, in a low voice: "I wish to speak frankly to you, Dunny."

"What is it, dear?"

"You guard yourself," she said, her lips trembling. "You are—reserved with me. You are—fearful. It's not—sporting of you. You didn't need to marry me. I love you dearly. I have tried in every way, these months we have been married, to do as you wish, to adjust my life to yours, to please you. But you must do some adjusting, too. Spring is coming again. The boys will soon be home. I am unhappy to think that you do not trust me as I trust you. What are you afraid of—that I will be untrue to you? That I will not deal fairly——"

"I don't know," he said miserably.

"I liked my own house better than yours," she told him proudly. "I have my own income. My children will never be a burden to you. Your attitude does not honor me."

He said nothing. Her hands were shaking. It was like a quarrel. As nearly as one could come to quarreling with Dunny. In the long silence she was beset with fears. Did he not love her? Was he disappointed? Was it, then, a mistake?

He stopped the car before the house as usual, and she went in and turned on the lights, while he drove around into the garage. Jenny went directly to their own room. She heard him lock the doors, turn out the lights. He came up-stairs and closed their door behind him. She had taken off her dress and sat by her dressing-table in a chiffon negligée of deep orchid very becoming to her. Quite without affectation or self-consciousness he came and knelt beside her, and turned her face to his.

"You are right, Jenny. Forgive me. I can tell you what I am afraid of. It is of you, yourself—not of anything you might do to me, that you knew. I am afraid of your power over me, of my love for you. It is a terrible thing to love a woman a lifetime, and then, at last, to have her. If I had gone away, as perhaps I should have done—— If I had not seen you any more! If my little wife had lived and borne me a family, this love might have been turned aside, lost and forgotten. But now—to have you! You must be patient with me, Jenny, as you are with Fowler. I have to work things out. Sometimes, I am struck with pain to think of all those years of my youth. I've found you in reality a thousand times stronger and deeper and more satisfy-

ing than desire could conceive. I am the happiest man alive, and yet I am afraid to look at my happiness. Something—instinct perhaps—makes me look away, dissemble a little. If the gods should see us—walking in such a radiance—— Do you understand what I feel? Something warns me to walk softly, to look away—to remember and be humble. Jenny, you can not begin to know what you mean to me, or how I love you——”

She laughed shakily. She drew him to her side and pressed his face against her breast.

“You think I do not know about love?” she said to him. “You think I can not feel as much as you can, that it will go away and leave me? Nothing can turn me aside from you, Dunny.”

“I don’t know,” he said gravely, his arms about her waist, looking into her dark face.

Ah, how wonderful he was, she thought—so grave and thoughtful, so tender—so controlled. Merle had been but a boy, always, careless, taking her for granted, impatient, indifferent. Dunny was almost too civilized.

“You have other claims on you,” he said. “You are a woman, and you are a mother. I have nothing but you. I never wanted anything else.”

He pressed his lips against her inner arm, and leaned against her. There was no passion, only a deep tenderness between them then. He said somberly what he had never spoken of before:

“That time, when I was a boy, Jenny—and lost you—it was very hard for me. I knew that nothing would take the place of you. I knew that my life was literally ruined. I did not dream that this could happen—that I could go on, for twenty years, and then have you—after all.”

"I am sorry," she whispered. "But now we are together—and my love is not all you are going to have, Dunny."

He looked up, startled.

"Jenny!"

She nodded.

"It is almost impossible that I am mistaken," she said. Her face brooded over his with infinite tenderness. "Will you like it, darling—a son or daughter of your own? A strong healthy one—a little plebeian, perhaps, born to love and fight and make his own way? To go to school, and study law, and be his father's partner—to bring home a wife and raise a family in the old Kent house?"

"You are not afraid, Jenny?"

She laughed.

"I am an old hand at this business, mister," she said.

He had risen, and he was walking back and forth across the room, his face alight with happiness.

"When you are safely through this ordeal, Jenny, and I have my own son in my arms, I will believe my happiness."

It was like a promise, solemn and strong.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

JENNY CAN NOT LET FOWLER GO

THE spring passed in a rosy succession of happy days. Dunny's anxieties, his care for her, amused her a little, but she accepted them gently. Merle had expected her to get through safely, but Dunny was almost morbid in his fears. He had lost Edythe in childbirth, she reminded herself when she was inclined to be impatient with him.

There was only one anxiety in Jenny's heart, this spring, for now there was no last barrier between herself and Dunny. She spoke of this fear to no one, though she knew that Dunny understood and sympathized with her. The news that Fowler was writing long charming letters to Marian Caruthers came to her in the nature of a blow. It was quite by accident, at the luncheon table, when one of Tom's friends came in and said that Miss Caruthers had read Fowler's last letter out loud in the class.

"It was a swell letter—seven pages. I asked Tom why he never told us those things, about Fowler, and he said he didn't know anything about him. Gee, we all thought that was funny, Mrs. Kent."

Tom reddened, and Dunny looked at Jenny quickly. But no one said anything. Jenny wrote and asked Fowler about it, and he answered yes, that he wrote to her regularly. He loved to write to her. She understood him, he told his mother. She marveled at his capacity to wound. What kind of man would he be, when he could strike now with such instinct! Her reports from his teachers were brilliant and full of praise, but he himself wrote only once a week, the dull, dutiful,

meager letter about the state of his health and the character of his grades. It scarcely varied from week to week. He would not soon forgive her, she saw, for her marriage.

She tried not to care, but that was impossible. She thought of him, in his white pajamas, standing at the foot of her bed, keeping watch over her. But it was so unfair! He was away at school. He had his own life before him, and he would deny her any life except its shadow. She could not lose him! Oh, dear God, she must not lose him! He was hers, flesh of her flesh, the child of herself and Merle. She could remember with fearful accuracy the pain and gripping blackness that had brought him into the world, the thousands of times she had risen, automatically, to go and draw the covers warm over his growing body, the nights when she and Mrs. Sims had sat by him, through scarlet fever, and Merle in Washington! She had tried to teach Susan to love him, to adjust the difficult family life for him.

He was, more than any of the others, like her father and mother in his tragic propensities, and he was like herself. He would act first and then try to make everything adjust itself to what he had done. Susan, after many years of deep love and coaxing from Jenny, was coming out of her detachment. Merle was growing into a fine young man. Tom was normal and healthy, even his faults of untidiness and tardiness and haste the wholesome normal faults of a boy. But in Fowler was the dark, the ruthless throbbing. She felt that he had been developing into a fine and talented man, when he had suffered what he considered a disappointment in her whom he loved best. His absurd artificial letters, his stiff politeness to her—it was a mistake, Dunny told her

once, gently, for her to pursue him. It increased his masculine and youthful importance. It enhanced his sense of tragedy and power.

He wrote, late in May, asking permission to go to a summer camp in Maine, without coming home. Several fellows in his class were going. The letter was in more detail than any had been before. Jenny's instinct was to refuse him outright. He must come home, but Dunny was not sure. Tom was to go back to the woodcraft school at Culver. Merle was to work on the *Hilltown Journal*. Fowler, he warned her, was not like the other boys. Her condition would be apparent to him. Perhaps he was not ready to come home yet, to make the adjustment. Jenny felt like crying out that he wanted her to lose Fowler, but she knew this was unfair. She controlled herself. She had counted on winning this son back again this summer.

They wrote at last, that he must come home when school was out, and, if he liked, he could return in August and spend a month in Maine before he went back to his last year of preparatory school. They heard nothing more from him until the conventional telegram from the school, stating the day and hour of his arrival home. Dunny met him at the train with Susan, and brought him home. Jenny scarcely knew him, he had grown so since Christmas. He was as tall as his stepfather. He was as grown up, in his ways, as Merle, who had already been home a week and was at work. Fourteen years old, he might have passed for eighteen anywhere. He was entirely gentlemanly and composed, albeit scornful and superior. His voice was changed. His talk, Jenny thought, was dangerous. He was absurdly modern and well educated, and his good opinion of himself was be-

yond all measure exaggerated. He and Merle took up their old struggle at once, though Merle would have been affectionate and friendly if Fowler had given him a chance.

Jenny told them they might use their father's old car, if they liked. Merle had driven it now and then, for a year or more. There were incessant quarrels—in Dunny's absence—as Fowler insisted on driving, though he was really too young to do so. Jenny, self-conscious and wretched over their quarrels, asked Merle either to settle it or let it go. The result of this was an actual battle between them, in which Fowler suffered a bruised cheek and swollen lip and sadly damaged dignity. After that, Merle drove the car, and Fowler would not put foot in it. But he was sullen.

Dunny thought Merle had been entirely in the right, as the older brother, to have Fowler up on the carpet. Jenny found that there was no use of appealing to Fowler. He had no use for any of them. He was simply enduring things until he could get away. He had started wrong with Dunny almost from the beginning. The second evening he was at home he did not show up for dinner, and when he came in at ten o'clock and Jenny asked him where he had been, he said indifferently:

"To see Miss Caruthers. She asked me for dinner."

"Couldn't you have told me?"

"I didn't think," he said.

Dunny spoke to him sternly.

"You are not to distress your mother," he said. "You can have some manners, at least. It is important to us to know where you are."

"Is it?" said Fowler, and went trailing off up the wide stairway.

Only the thought that he made himself more unhappy than any one, kept Jenny from boxing his ears. She puzzled about him. Where had he gone off on this track anyhow? What could she do with him? Every method seemed alike unsuccessful. He was impervious to instruction and appeal, to threats, or violence or wooing. He was too big to spank.

At the table, a day or so after their battle, Merle was telling Dunny something that had happened at Culver, and Fowler broke in on him scathingly:

"That military school stuff is certainly adolescent," he said. "The big blah—the army, the state and the nation! Wave the flag, and give three cheers for Wall Street. How can you fall for that bunk, Merle? I thought you were intelligent."

"If you're not adolescent, what's the matter with you?" said Merle angrily. "And if you're intelligent, heaven save me from it!"

"Boys—please——"

"Oh, he makes me sick," said Merle. "Him and his intelligence! God and the angels! He thinks cutting up live frogs is superior to the Black Horse Troop! He's a big bore, if you ask me. And I'll bet he's a socialist, as well."

Fowler smiled pityingly.

"Hardly," he said. "That's another antiquity."

Dunny silenced the conversation peremptorily, but not until Fowler added that he hoped to get through adolescence without a loss of dignity, at which Susan and Tom and Merle shouted with laughter, and Jenny and Dunny smiled in spite of themselves. It was like many things that he did and said, both absurd and pathetic. It might have been amusing, the ordinary family strife

between brothers, save for the strain of unrelenting animosity in Fowler. Merle was affectionate enough. He loved Tom and Susan, and they were devoted to him. Jenny felt that Fowler, outside of this triple alliance, helpless to make peace, became more difficult all the time. She began to doubt that it had been wise to force him to come home.

Dunny found him one night in his own room, with a book that brought the slow red of anger into his stepfather's face.

"I am a man of considerable experience, Fowler," Dunny said to him, "and I have found this kind of information is of no value to any man. It has no purpose at all, except to feed a licentious imagination. Do not deceive yourself that it is curiosity, or a desire for knowledge which has brought this book into your hands. It is entirely an ignoble impulse. In all the years that I knew your father, he revealed no such curiosity or interest—as this! You do not need this kind of information to make you a great scientist or a great man."

Jenny, who knew nothing of this or of Fowler's sulky resentment, tried to treat him as naturally and affectionately as she did her other children. One day, when he came to her for money he wanted for something and she found herself thus, accidentally, alone with him, she told him that she was to have a child in the early winter. His face grew very red.

"I know," he said.

She felt herself daunted. Merle had simply kissed her and said, "Good girl, Jenny—I know Father's pleased!" But Fowler's eyes were bright with anger. Jenny went on:

"Fowler, I hope, next winter, that you will find it in

your heart to write to me more than you did last year. It made me very unhappy. No one loves you more than I do or is more interested in every little thing that happens to you. It is unsuitable for you to set yourself against me and condemn me. It is even foolish. You are young and lack experience of life. When you are grown, you will regret your present attitude."

"It is not an attitude," he said proudly, and with more truth than he knew; "I can not help it."

"But that is wrong, too, dear. You must learn that you can help things. Even now, I have things to meet and overcome, and in youth, they are always confronting one. You don't need to nourish this feeling. I haven't changed in my feeling for you. You are one thing to me, Dunny another. If your father could know, I don't believe he would condemn me for marrying again. He would be glad I was not alone. He loved Dunny, and he was always generous and wanted every one to be happy. So why should you condemn me? Is it your affair?"

He sat slouched in a chair beside her desk, his long, loose-jointed boy's body half slumped together, his moody black eyes fixed on the wall opposite him.

"I thought—that day last September—when you slapped me, and then—we made up, and you told Mr. Kent you wouldn't go with him—I thought—I took it for a promise from you. I thought you meant you would be true to our father, that you were through—with men. And the first letter I had from you, you said you had been to Stone City with him. And I knew then you meant to throw us down."

"But have I thrown you down, as you say? I never meant that as a promise. I suppose I should have let

the blow stand! I had no intention, at any time, of giving up any friendship that seemed good to me. You were going away to school. I was doing everything to further your wishes. What would you have thought if I had asked you to give up your education, to stay near me?"

"You see?" he said.

She did not see at all, and said so.

"In a few years, Fowler, you will be away from me all the time. Would you have wanted me to be lonely, then? My marriage will be freedom for you, in time."

"I would have taken care of you," he said passionately. "*I would never have forsaken you.*"

"But that would have been wrong," she protested gently, "even if you could have done it, which is unlikely. I wouldn't be the proper companion for you. It is better for me to be with some one of my own generation. You are young and modern, and your ways are different from ours——" Skilfully she flattered him, but he seemed helpless in his fixation of enmity with his family.

"I don't love you as I did," he explained at last. "That's all. I have new friends that matter to me. It's just as though you were—well, like Daddy—gone. I'm an orphan. That's what it amounts to. And I'd like to have my own money to manage. I've a right to it, and I'd know what to do with it."

"He doesn't know what he is saying," she told herself despairingly. "He is young and ignorant and crude—he can not possibly have any idea of what he is saying. I must pay no attention to him—I must not remember these words—he is a great baby—sulking and bragging." The word incorrigible is not a word in the

vocabulary of gentle-mannered people. It was not a word Jenny could use of her own son. It was a label of defeat. But she had grown so pale that even the fogs of his colossal self-importance were penetrated.

"I say, Mother, I'm sorry. I didn't mean just that."

"I'm afraid," she told him, "that you will have to answer for those words, some day. Things come back upon us—everything comes back."

Her words died away and she sat still, her hand pressed against her face. "Everything that we do and say—— We can not even pray to be delivered from justice, because we know it will be a relief—to pay."

"And can I have my money, Mother? What Mrs. Clarke left me?"

"No, Fowler. You can have only your allowance from me. I pay your school bills out of the interest of that money, but it isn't yours, or mine to give you, until you are of age. All that you have—I give you—now."

"Miss Caruthers thinks I would do better away from home," he said. His mind had returned to the fascinating subject of himself. "She thinks there is too much conflict between Merle and me, between my stepfather and me—that I'd do better clear away."

"Miss Caruthers is an amateur at life," Jenny told him sharply. "She doesn't know what she is talking about. She is doing a dangerous thing, to alienate you from me! There is no conflict between you and your stepfather. If you told her there was, you lied to her. He has always loved and admired you, and will do so as long as it is possible. As for Merle, all brothers quarrel, and he is good to you—and for you. He would love you and be friends with you, if you gave him a chance. You are not generous enough to love him—

you want the ascendancy. I think it would be better for you if you were at home all the time, and never away."

Her hands shook as she stacked the letters on her desk together.

"Miss Caruthers is not alienating me," he answered. "She doesn't know how I feel—about you. We have never spoken of you. But James Lattimer told me that she was engaged to Dad—our own Dad—and you were engaged to Dunny, and you stole Dad away from her, and ditched Dunny and left her to be an old maid. I don't think that was very sporting or very honorable of you, Mother."

Jenny laughed hysterically.

"What an insufferable young cad you have grown to be," she said, her face scarlet now, her voice cutting as a whip, "discussing my affairs—the impertinence of you! I don't believe it matters much to me whether you write to me or not. You are absolutely impossible. You are crude and ignorant and self-satisfied, not smart and sophisticated, if you want the truth. You reached your peak two years ago, and you have degenerated steadily since."

She rose and stood looking down at him. She was magnificent in her anger. Her beautiful mouth was curled with scorn, her eyes were dilated with indignation.

"Even a mother has a limit to her capacity to take things—and I have taken all that I can from you. You will go to your room now, and stay there until I have given you permission to come down-stairs. What you need is to be treated like the spoiled child you are, and that will be my attitude toward you now."

He rose and stood before her, dogged and stubborn.

"Where do you think you would have been, if your

father had married Marian Caruthers?" she demanded of him. "Can you imagine yourself—apart from me? You are Fowler through and through. You are well named."

"I didn't say I wished he had married her"—he tried to defend himself a little from the blaze—"I only said that——"

"Too much! You said too much! Go, now."

"Mother, is it true that Grandfather Fowler killed a man and was in prison for it twenty years?"

She gave a low moan and slumped back into her chair.

"Yes, it is true," she said, struggling not to go to pieces while he was there.

"Why did you name me for him, Mother, when you knew that?"

"It must have been intuition," she said. She could strike, too!

The breach was complete. Jenny could not make any move toward Fowler, lest she lose the rags of his respect that were left to her. She treated him with impersonal courtesy. She said nothing to Dunny of the bitter quarrel she had had with her son. It would have distressed him too much. And she was still unconsciously, and instinctively, protecting Fowler.

Only one gesture she allowed herself. She wrote to Marian:

I must ask you not to see so much of Fowler. I feel that your influence is to turn him away from his family, and those situated to do the most for him. It is an impertinence for you to uphold him in his childish judgments against the wishes of his father and myself——

There was no answer to this letter. Fowler went away to camp in August, and the whole family breathed a great sigh of relief when he was gone. Tom came back from the woodcraft camp, sunburned and sturdy. Merle, who had been working faithfully all summer, began to get his traps together to return to Culver. Tom was to go back with him.

Dunny and Susan and Jenny went on a holiday early in September, to the lakes, where Dunny played golf, and Susan spent most of her time in the water, swimming and diving. Jenny allowed her to dance, every evening, for a while, in the hotel. Jenny swam at night with Dunny. She spent a great deal of time drifting about in a rowboat, drawing up under great trees, resting and trying to bring some peace to her soul. She had had a rich and fine life. She had more than other women. Could she now break her heart over this boy with his morbid jealousy? Perhaps a complete breach would be the best thing for him. Let him go!

But she could not let him go.

CHAPTER TWENTY

DURHAM KENT IV

DUNNY wrote to Fowler at Thanksgiving:

Dear Son: This is to let you know that you have a new brother, born last night. We have named him Durham Kent IV. We want you all to feel that he is, in every aspect of loyalty and affection, your brother.

Your mother is well, and very happy with the the new baby. I want you to write to her, and tell her that you are glad of her successful delivery. She has been much grieved about you. It seems to me a great waste that this unjustified attitude of yours should hurt her so much. She does not complain of you, but it is impossible for us to fail to understand her trouble.

We love you dearly, and have tried to understand you, to make allowances for your youth and temperament. But it is time now for you to put aside childish things and come to man's estate. Next year you will be ready for the university, and I must have very definite proof that you are mature and steady enough for it, before I can consent to your matriculation while you are still so young.

Your mother joins me in sending you our love.

Affectionately yours,

Durham Kent.

Jenny saw the letter, and gave it back to Dunny without comment. He mailed it and hardened his heart against his stepson.

"If he continues to act in this sulky manner, I will certainly bring him home and put him to work," he

told her firmly, and she nodded, smiling at him, saying nothing. Dunny stooped over her and kissed her.

“You are all right?” he asked tenderly.

He was, himself, pale and worn. Her magical, mysterious recuperation, her happiness were a source of amazement to him. He could not at once rebound, as she had done, from the cruel ordeal of her accouchement. The birth of this last child had been long-drawn out, terrible, exhausting to herself, heart-breaking to Dunny. She had wanted to stay at home, and he had obtained the services of the finest obstetrician in the state. There were two trained nurses—Mrs. Sims had attended Jenny with the other four—and young Doctor Lockerbie. Yet all they could do was to wait. The ordeal was Jenny’s. Dunny, white and shaken, walked the floor, came and went, listened with horror to the doctor and the nurse laughing together, went in to Jenny and kissed her and stroked her cheek, went back to Mrs. Sims, who wept without knowing it. He was filled with remorse—that he had brought her to this!

But the new baby was the finest she had ever borne. He was tall and fine-boned, and already about the brow and mouth was the look of his father. He was the flower of Jenny’s life, the gift of maturity. The long, beautifully shaped head, the fine hands and narrow arched feet, the clear dark tone of his skin, all were Dunny. But he was his mother’s son. He had a deep chest, a loud, imperious voice, and already, amazing energy. His feet and hands were in constant motion, when he was awake. He slept deeply, and for surprisingly long intervals, wakened starved and furious.

Merle and Tom, home for Thanksgiving Day, carried the new baby about to the nurse’s and Dunny’s anxiety,

though Jenny seemed to have no fear for him. Merle was a young man now, a senior, tall and broad and charming, so like his father in his face and figure, in his affectionate, happy-go-lucky ways that it seemed almost as if Merle himself had come back to them. The boys were plainly delighted with the new brother.

"I remember when Susan was born," Merle told them, "and Dad took me in and put me in bed beside mother, the next morning, and told me to look at the baby. I thought she was some kind of new toy until she began to yell!"

He hugged Dunny, sat on Jenny's bed and stirred the baby and made him cry. Dunny's pride and satisfaction in Merle was a great compensation to Jenny for Fowler. Tom, too, was interested and pleased with the new brother, and Susan was in raptures. Jenny saw at once that it was going to be very fine for Susan, not to be the baby any longer. She could see how the little fellow was welding them all together, making one family of them, with his round baby face and tightly closed fists. All of them save Fowler.

Letters and telegrams came to Dunny and Jenny from far and near. But it was not until the first day Jenny sat up, in a rocker by her bed when the baby was two weeks old, that an envelope came to her in Fowler's writing. She dreaded to open it, put it aside, took it up again and put it among the things on the table by her bed. After an hour or so, when she was alone, she opened it and read it carefully, but it was nothing. It had no meaning for her. A conventional, a correct letter, a literal obedience to Dunny's command. There was nothing of Fowler in it—nothing for Jenny. It might have been copied from a letter-writer's manual.

Jenny laid it aside calmly and went on looking at the pictures in a new magazine Dunny had brought her. "I don't care," she said, surprised, but after a long time the slow tears began to fall from her eyes.

It was the end. He was lost to her for ever. He was gone. She must yield now to this pronouncement. She would never have Fowler any more. It was not right to torment him with their importunities longer. They must let him go, let him try to find some other happiness. She took up the little bundle which lay on the bed beside her, and cradled him in her arms.

"You have cost me dear, my sweet." She kissed the rose-leaf of her baby's cheek. "But the dearer you cost me, the dearer you are. Never stop loving me, little son. Never turn and strike me!" She would not write to Fowler again—would leave him entirely to Dunny.

The baby made an inexplicable sound, and Jenny laughed shakily. It made her feel so young, to have a baby at her breast again. She felt like a girl, she told herself. These great tall sons were surely not hers—and the little one too. No, she was a girl again—she closed her eyes—a bride, Dunny's bride—and this her first——

Dunny was with Jenny and the baby every moment he could manage. It had finally penetrated his belief, that Jenny was all right and the baby was thriving. The baby's clamor amazed him beyond words. He never wearied of hearing him, of sitting and looking at him, as he slept. He made fun of himself, a little, but his affection and devotion did not abate, for that.

"I had a nice letter from Fowler to-day," said Jenny that evening, and Dunny looked at her smiling face and said, "Did you? That's fine." But he did not ask to

see the letter, and she did not offer to show it to him. They understood each other, those two.

The first day that Jenny was down-stairs, tying great red bows on the holly wreaths to be hung in the windows, she had several visitors. The nurse brought the baby down to show them, and Jenny asked her to leave him, in his perambulator, with them. Mrs. Bowen came, and one of the girls from the bank, and Mrs. Lattimer, telling Jenny how strong and healthy James had been from birth. Each woman admired Jenny's baby, and talked about her own. The nurse suggested that Jenny should go back to the privacy of her own room—she was very frail—when Mrs. Sims came in and said that Marian Caruthers was at the door.

“Just this one guest, please, nurse,” said Jenny, “and I will go up-stairs. She's some one that might misunderstand if I refused to see her.”

Mrs. Sims and the nurse left them together. Marian had come directly from school. She was carrying an umbrella against the fog outside. Her brown hair curled against her hat, and her cheeks were flushed with cold or embarrassment. Under her glasses her eyes were as round and blue as ever. She looked like a girl, Jenny thought—as innocent and inexperienced as Susan.

Marian was a little uncertain of her reception, but she had a quality of timid persistence unlike anything in Jenny. She said, as Jenny greeted her with courtesy:

“I want to see your baby, Jenny. They say he is lovely.”

Jenny told Marian to lift the baby and give it to her, and when he lay upon her knees she unfolded the soft woolen shawl and showed Marian how tall he was, what fine feet and limbs he had. Marian bent over him,

and the baby looked at her with wavering gaze and made a sudden sound and his arms flew out. The two women laughed softly. They stared at him for several long minutes in silence, and then he put his fist in his mouth and began to wail. Jenny lifted him to her breast to nurse him. She talked a little to Marian, her eyes fixed on the baby, whose small rosy hand was pressed against her bosom. Marian said at last, shyly, but with determination:

“Jenny, about Fowler—I had no desire to wean him away from you. He is so bright—his mind is so much quicker than any one’s I know—I have had only the sincerest affection for him. It meant something to me that he was your son, and Merle’s, some special trust. I can’t define what I felt. It was important to me that he should do his work perfectly, exert himself, attain all his possibilities. You see, I have all these boys, year after year. The most difficult age, and they follow certain well-beaten paths. They are either moody or hilarious, full of self-pity or without feeling, girl-crazy or girl-shy. It’s not natural for a boy to be settled at fourteen, and Fowler, especially, is less mature in character than he is in his mind. I only wanted to drift along with him, and see if I could not exert a little influence on him, without seeming to do so.”

Jenny said nothing, looking at her steadily. Marian made a little imploring gesture.

“It is necessary to me for you to believe me. After all that lies behind us, it would be very bitter for me if you thought I was trying to influence your son, or—to seek any revenge on you. I wouldn’t do that, Jenny. I have always loved you.”

The baby had fallen asleep. Jenny drew her negligée across her breast, and sat holding the baby straight across her knees with one hand, the filmy georgette in the other. She said, after a little:

"You shame me, Marian. I know you were not—revengeful. I didn't really think of that. It's just—perhaps you don't understand what we are up against, with Fowler—serious difficulties. He is very jealous of Dunny. I think I have lost him. I suppose I should be glad if any one else will retain a hold on him. But I was wild with worry at the time I wrote to you. I had quarreled with him. He quoted you to me—he set himself in judgment upon me——"

"He will find himself," said Marian confidently, gently.

Jenny looked at her strangely. The faded innocent face of the other was entirely without guile. She was refined, a gentlewoman, hopeful and optimistic. She was evidently incapable of resentment, seeking to vindicate and justify herself, when it was Jenny who was in the wrong. All the old childish love for Marian came back to Jenny's heart with a stab of pain, a rush of fresh tears. Without warning, without time to ward it off, Jenny could hear her mother's sorrowful voice—"My husband a murderer, my daughter a thief!" She saw now how her action must have wounded and disappointed her mother. Yet she had been gentle and kind and, beyond that one bitter word, had never reproached Jenny.

"We don't know what to do with Fowler, Marian," she said at last helplessly. "He's too young, too immature, to go to any university. He's tall and overgrown, with many queer and dangerous ideas. He'll graduate in the spring. What then?"

"Why not put him to work for two years—not as a punishment"—Jenny understood that Dunny's letter had been confided to Marian—"but as a part of his education. Something adventurous. If he could have two years on a boat, or railroading, doing something out-of-doors, hard physical work to fill him out and make him more practical and give him heartier habits. Or if he could work for two years in a semi-scientific project, in a laboratory of a chemical company, or a wireless or telephone manufacturer, or for a rubber company—in the tropics, something with enough strangeness to appeal to him. I have a friend who works for a fruit company that has offices in South America. Perhaps he could get Fowler a job there, if you wouldn't mind my asking."

Jenny's fingers were under the heavy sweet head of Dunny's baby. She said at last, in a low voice:

"I would be very glad, I would be very grateful to you—if you did. And as for the other—I can only apologize for my attitude."

Marian rose with a bright smile. She was all school-teacher now. She stooped, with a small futile gesture, and patted the sleeping baby's hand, and said, so that Jenny could scarcely believe she had been so practical a moment before:

"And we are going to take care of the new baby, and not worry about Fowler any more, aren't we? Your baby is beautiful, Jenny. I think you have the loveliest children—all so bright and healthy, and so promising. You are very fortunate."

After she was gone Jenny sat for a long time, in the gathering twilight, holding the baby, her eyes unmov-

ing, lost in thought. If she had let Fowler go to Marian two years ago, or if she had made and kept the promise he had thought she made him and never gone on with Dunny! Ah, no, dear God—she could not have done that. If, then—she had chosen Dunny and yielded Fowler——

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

FOWLER IS HOME

So DUNNY found her when he came in. He took the baby and carried him up-stairs and put him in his crib and covered him. Jenny followed slowly, stopped a moment to look at the baby and went to sit down on the *chaise longue* drawn near the grate. Dunny closed the door. The room was warm, the house quiet. Twilight pressed on the windows. She said abruptly:

“Marian Caruthers has been here. She thinks, Dunny, that it would be wise to let Fowler go to work for two years before he goes to the university. He could. She has a friend who could get him a job in South America. It seems far away, but it might be sensible. Don’t you think so? I—I have given him up, now, Dunny. I do not write to him, or entreat him any more. His future lies with you, with your wishes and judgment. If you will take the responsibility for me.”

He did not answer. He was standing in the shadow near the crib.

“I—I have never been nice to Marian, but she insists on being nice to me. She begs me, Dunny. I think she really loves Fowler. I actually believe she still loves me.”

He stood looking at her strangely, where the firelight played over her. She said after a moment:

“Why do you look at me like that? What is the matter?”

He did not answer, and she realized that since he had come in he had not spoken a word to her, only come up-stairs with her, carrying the baby. She had been too

preoccupied to notice it. She said to him now, her voice sharp with fear:

"What's the matter, Dunny?"

"It's Fowler," he said in a low voice. He came over and sat down by her, as though he were weak. He took a telegram from his coat pocket.

Jenny gave a little cry. Her hand flew to her throat. "Not——" she said hoarsely, and he said at once:

"No—no, Jenny, forgive me for frightening you so. He's not been hurt. There has been an accident—that is to say—he's all right. It's just—sit down here by me again, darling. It's a long telegram. You must make up your mind now that you are going to take it very calmly. There have been two telegrams—one from Fowler. I'll show you that later."

"Dunny—for God's sake—tell me!"

"He has been dismissed from school."

"For what? What has he done? He's made fine grades——"

He could not tell her. She saw the small beads of sweat that stood out on his forehead, on his upper lip. He held his face stiffly and his voice was calm at last, when he spoke to her. He drew her down upon the *chaise longue* beside him.

"He's not coming home at once. I'm going east. I will look after him, Jenny."

She would have taken the telegram out of his hand, but he folded it and put it away from her.

"Not that way, Jenny—not that way. It's hard to understand. I couldn't make it out at once. You see, dear—he and some other boys—there were seven of them—evidently had a secret society of some kind. Something adolescent, some crazy boy's stuff. They have

been studying about African aborigines, I take it. And they had an initiation——” He stopped, faltered, started again, “They had some kind of a mystery, God knows what—something they had read or heard rumors of or something they made up themselves. They were going to pledge in one another’s blood, and well—you see, Jenny, the initiate—they weren’t skilful enough to do that sort of thing. They were probably all very excited—— He didn’t—oh, my God, Jenny—why do I have to bring you these terrible tidings—that Merle was gone—that Fowler—— Don’t sit there, my darling—don’t sit there looking at me like that—frozen with horror.”

But she knew.

“One of them died,” she said. His face showed her nothing. She said again with a small sharp scream, “Did one of them die?”

“Yes,” he said, “the candidate died. And now—they have them all there——”

“In prison?” she asked.

He nodded, and then said sturdily, “But you are not to worry.”

“It is murder,” she said. “Fowler is charged with murder.”

“Oh, Jenny—not that! I will go east, to-night. I’ll take care of him. I know the law. He’s a minor. I’m his guardian. The school is responsible, not the boys. I’ve already wired a colleague in New York—the man who got Fowler into the school—to go right down there. They can’t keep them there in jail, Jenny—young boys like that. It’s going to be hard for you—to stay here and wait.”

“Stay here? Stay here? I am going with you!”

"No," he said, "no—you are not to go."

"You think you can leave me here?"

"But the baby, Jenny—and it will be man's business."

She had forgotten the baby. She looked at the small enameled crib, with its soft silk and woolen blankets, in which Dunny's baby lay sleeping. She looked back at Dunny, her lips parted, her eyes wild with fright. He pressed her face suddenly, roughly against his shoulder. He held her.

"Cry, Jenny, cry! Let go and weep. I will do everything. I will not come back without him!"

"You promise me—you will bring him back?"

"Jenny, I will bring him back to you."

"No matter what you have to do—you will bring Fowler home?"

"I will bring him home——"

"You understand"—she spoke with difficulty, fighting to make herself plain to him—"you understand, Dunny, Fowler can not spend his life in prison." Abruptly another thought smote her. "He will not let you do anything for him! He is at war with us, with you and me, because we have loved each other more than him!"

"No, you are mistaken. This is his telegram. It came while I was sitting there in the office, trying to think how I could tell you."

"I can't read it," she moaned.

His face was wet with tears.

"I will read it to you. 'Dear Father——' See, Jenny—he calls me father. He never did that before. 'Please tell Mother I couldn't help it.' We must believe what he says, Jenny—he couldn't help it. 'Please come to me right away. I will do whatever you say. It was not our fault. Please do not tell any one but Mother.'"

"Did Fowler send that?"

"Yes, Jenny. They must have allowed each one to wire home. I'm going now, and you must promise me not to read the paper—to trust me. I can't bear to leave you, but I've got to take the evening train. It's already after five. If you can be brave—just once more—it won't be long——"

He left her, then came back dressed for travel, his tailored dark blue coat buttoned closely around him, his hard hat in one hand, his gloves in the other. Mrs. Sims was packing his bag for him. Jenny was sitting where he had left her. He put his arm around her and kissed her.

"I will telegraph you every day, or I can call you, on long distance, if you would rather——"

She lifted a face so distraught that she did not look like herself. "You must bring Fowler home to me. It is all that matters."

"I will bring him," he promised again. He stood for a moment, waiting for some word or look from her, but she did not notice him. His own face paled and set. He stooped over the baby in the crib and touched its cheek with his finger. He turned back to Jenny.

"I will do everything for Merle's son that I would do for my own—more," he said.

She did not hear him, was not aware that he left her. He went for his bag, and told Mrs. Sims briefly what had happened, that Fowler was in trouble, that he was going east. She must stay close to Jenny.

"She's sitting in there like a wooden woman."

"I'll take care of her. Oh, the bad boy, Mr. Kent!"

"And Mrs. Sims, she is not to see any papers. There will probably be scream head-lines—it's the sort of thing

the papers love. You had better have Doctor Lockerbie in to see her——”

“Pray God, Mr. Kent, it is not so bad as you fear.”

He took his bag and went quickly down-stairs and out to his car. The train was already whistling in the Narrows.

Mrs. Sims went in to Jenny, who looked at her blankly, and then said at once:

“Call Marian Caruthers—ask her to come here.”

She did not move or speak again until Marian was there. Then Jenny said to Mrs. Sims:

“See if Mr. Kent left the telegram.” Mrs. Sims looked for it and found it, and brought it back to them. Jenny put it in Marian’s hands. The school-teacher read it and made a queer little half-strangled sound. She tore it into pieces and threw it on the fire, instinctively, as if she could wipe out the facts behind it. She said at once:

“Do you want me to go with him?”

“I can not go,” said Jenny imploringly. And then a wild fury came over her. She rose and said: “What am I thinking of? Who will go, if not I? Mrs. Sims—you can take care of the baby perfectly. You will have to start him with a bottle—use the formula we raised Susan on. Where is my suit-case? I can be driven to Stone City and catch the flyer there. I will be in Philadelphia in time to catch the New York train, that Dunny is on.”

“You are not able to go, Jenny,” said Mrs. Sims. “You are scarcely able to walk. This is the first day you have been up and dressed.”

“I am as strong as a lion,” said Jenny fiercely. “I can go around the world if I have to—for Fowler. Do

you think there is any one that can do what I can do, can think and scheme as I can, for Fowler?"

"When Dunny brings him home, he will need you here," said Marian gently, persuasively.

But Jenny did not hear her. She had torn off her negligée, and stood so, in her satin slip. She began to open and close drawers furiously. Marian whispered to Mrs. Sims, who went out. The teacher stood helplessly, watching the stronger-willed woman. Jenny said to her, in so commanding a tone that there was nothing to do but obey:

"Get my dressing-case out of the closet there—it's on the shelf. Here is a nightgown, and my brushes—I will need warmer stockings and my heavy shoes. Where is Mrs. Sims? She can pack for me. I will wear my tweed suit, and take my fur coat, so that I will not catch cold. I can sleep on the train——"

"Jenny, you must not go. Please—darling!"

Jenny was brushing her long black hair. Her arm flew out in an unnatural manner, and her knees folded beneath her. Marian caught her as she fell.

"Mrs. Sims!" she cried, "Mrs. Sims!"

The older woman came running. Between them they got Jenny into bed, and bathed her face with cold water.

"I sent for the doctor. He will be here in a moment—give me the eiderdown there—she is chilling——"

Jenny lay moaning beneath the soft satin eiderdown, while the slow red of fever burned over her face and throat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE BOYS ARE GONE

WHAT miracles he performed, Jenny did not know, but Dunny came back with Fowler with him. They were a silent pair, the stepfather grim, burnt-out, the boy badly scared. Jenny felt some change in Dunny at once, when he came in and stooped over her and kissed her. His hand upon her cheek was cold and dry. He was absolutely non-committal.

"Fowler is going to work down at the paper," he said. "He'll learn to set the linotype machine, learn a trade. His schooldays are over, now."

"Yes, Dunny." She looked at him beseechingly, but he did not tell her anything. For three days and nights she had burned with fever, and now she lay weakly, watching the door as the family came and went. Fowler came in to her, and sat down on the little chair by her bed.

"Mother——" he said.

She smiled at him, and suddenly he was on his knees there, his face pressed into her soft shoulder, and he was crying. He was almost six feet tall, his dark face was strange and new. It looked like a foreign face to her. She felt that her little boy, Fowler, had been for ever obliterated by some man she did not know. But she stroked his head gently.

"You are all right now, darling. You are home. You have not seen the baby. Look at your little brother, Fowler."

He looked at the baby and touched it experimentally. But he could not understand about the baby, about this

new life, as wilful, as tormented, as important in its protoplasm as his own. He stayed close to Jenny for several days, and then went down to work.

There had been a great deal of stir and gossip in the town. The story in the papers had not been so bad as Dunny had feared. The boys had been eventually exonerated. But there were editorials and sermons about it all. The seven youths had organized a society of boys whose parents had "ditched" them. That was the way they put it. They were to form ties closer than family ties—new blood bonds. They were to stand by one another always. The editorials in the papers spoke harshly of the parents of these seven boys, spoke of divorce, wealth, of "substitution" and other mysteries. Certain facts, brought to light by Dunny and his able friend, had substantiated the story the boys told. The school had wished to hush the matter up. The parents of the dead boy were also anxious to let it go.

But none of these boys could ever expect to be admitted to a good school again.

Fowler was home!

For a while it was all Jenny could think of. He was here, safe, and he was subdued, eager to please them. It was unavoidable that at this time the town should rehearse the tragedy of Jenny's father, and people began to say to one another, "There's bad blood there."

When they settled down into their regular routine, Jenny saw that Dunny, under the quiet every-day precision of his manner, was changed. She sensed some stiffening of the soul in him, some inner catastrophe. She was very gentle and loving to him, patient and sweet beyond her own affectionate nature. One night she went into the up-stairs sitting-room, where he was

working. She walked softly over the deep rug and laid her hand upon his arm. To her astonishment he started up so violently that the pen he had in his hand flew across the room. He turned a face as white as death to her. They looked at each other, and Dunny laughed uncertainly.

"You startled me," he said in a low voice, looking away.

"Dunny," she said in a whisper.

He smiled at her. He had regained his composure. "I'm getting to be an old man, I guess—and jumpy. Jenny, don't look so frightened. I was a thousand miles away."

But she was not deceived. Dunny was afraid. Of what? Unexpectedly, she began to cry, and Dunny caught her in his arms, laughed and teased her, kissed her and made love to her, told her that he would not have it. She had never been a cry-baby, and she was not to start it now when everything was fine for them. She yielded to his coaxing, but her heart was not at rest.

She stayed on quietly at home with the new baby all winter. Merle and Tom came down for Christmas holidays, and Merle said it was hot for them at school. He had been going around with a chip on his shoulder. He had felt impelled to withdraw his name from class elections. His school life was ruined. Tom, too, was gloomy, but not so resentful as Merle. They were, however, not very friendly with Fowler. The old league against him was in operation, and for the first time Jenny was willing to admit that it was Fowler's fault.

Fowler took everything with a strange new humility. Jenny understood this, too. This trait was familiar as breath to her. He had gone his own way with unstemmed

wilfulness, and now he was walking softly, asking for his punishment, trying to clear himself in his own soul. He was like her—he was more like her than any of them, only she had been more loving than Fowler, and she had lacked his capacity to wound.

The other boys, on Dunny's advice, went back to school to face it out. It would soon be forgotten, he told them. The interval of Christmas would prove a distraction. Their real friends would be loyal to them. They must stand on their own records, always. Jenny felt that this family of hers was a great care to Dunny. She went about her affairs meticulously, though her limbs seemed light and unsteady beneath her. She feared she would have to wean the baby, and she could feel in Dunny something more disastrous than harassment. One night she said to him:

“What did you do, Dunny? How did you get him off?”

He smiled at her and said lightly:

“I told you I would bring him home, and I did. But I am not to be questioned about it, Jenny. Whatever it was, I was glad to do it—for you.” He stroked her cheek, and said softly, “Do you remember so many years ago, when you wrote to me and told me that you and Merle were going to be married, and I answered and told you that I would always be willing to do anything for you? Forgive me for speaking of it, Jenny, but at last it had been my privilege to make my boast good. I meant it then, and I have never changed. And for Fowler, too—he is so young!”

“I have brought you much trouble, Dunny,” she said humbly.

“That is not all you have brought me,” he said. “For

trouble we are all born. We can not escape it. But to have a little happiness—to have love, along the way, that is treasure, Jenny. And of all things, now, you must not grow humble. It is your spirit—your pride—that is so magnificent. Neither Fowler nor I would want you different. I am all right, and I was never happier.”

But Jenny felt worried about him. As the winter advanced he began to be troubled with an old nervous indigestion that he had had the year he had lost his wife and his little daughter. He had to be very careful about what he ate. Jenny got a diet list from the doctor and saw to it that his food was just what it should be. He was compelled by his own nature to bear everything in silence. It was his tenseness, his repression, that made him ill. For her part, she ate seriously what she was told was good for her. She took her naps, her out-of-door exercise conscientiously, but with a superstitious lack of belief. She must grow strong again, now, and her will alone would enable her to do it. She must be a pillar of the family.

Fowler read late every night in his own room. Jenny tried to leave him in peace, encouraged him in his visits to Marian. She felt that not much could be done for him, at once. He went to work sharply on time every morning. He brought her his pay and wanted her to take his board out of it, and she did so. He found a crony or two, began to take pleasure in going to movies. Gradually Jenny relaxed. She began to wonder if they might not all be happy again. But she felt that Fowler's presence in the house galled Dunny, though he was never anything but kind to his stepson. They could not send Fowler away. He was on probation, under parole to his stepfather, and was to stay in Hilltown.

One day he came to her when she was resting.

"I came by Grandmother Fowler's house to-day, Muth, and I noticed it is empty. I'd like to go down there to live. Do you think I could? Could I pay the rent on it, or manage it?"

"Go there alone, Fowler?"

"Well, couldn't I get some one to go with me? Some housekeeper?"

"Would you like to have Mrs. Sims?"

"Could I afford it, Muth?"

"Yes," she said, "between us, we could afford it. I can take care of the work here. It will be good for me to have more to do, and Mrs. Sims is growing old, and will be glad to slow down. There will be only Susan and the baby and Dunny and I here. Next year Susan is going away to school. If you want to live in that house, and if Susan wishes, it will be all right with me."

"I could study there, Muth. I want to go on with my Latin and Greek. I—I'm thinking of being a writer some day, Muth."

"That will be fine, Fowler."

"I'll have you over for supper some night—Sims and I will. And I'll come here to see you often. But I—I feel like the devil around Father, Muth. He—well, I don't think he likes me. I don't blame him," he added hastily. "He couldn't, really, but I think maybe I'd be happier down there." He was still thinking of himself and his happiness.

"Fowler, will you tell me what happened—how your father managed it, to bring you home?"

"Cornel said he gave a bribe. Four of the fathers put up some money, but Father the most of all. I don't know. He told me never to speak of it to him or any

one. But I'll pay him back, when I get my own money. I'll pay it back to him, every cent of it."

She lay looking at him.

"You can never pay him back, Fowler," she said, "because you can never give him back what he had. He was an honest man. He never gave or took a bribe in his life, or mismanaged a case, or influenced a court—you don't understand it at all—what he did."

"You think it was dishonest, Mother?" he said, his eyes wide.

She gave him up for hopeless.

"Whatever Dunny did, was well done," she said. "But I know what it cost him. He has not had much joy from you and me, Fowler."

She was shaken with sorrow to think that Dunny had had this sacrifice of his honor to make for one of Merle's sons. She had said she would do her own paying—do it gladly, but Dunny was paying.

Fowler stood before her in silence. He sighed.

"Well," he said uneasily, "I'll be gone. I'll talk to Mrs. Sims."

Within a week he had moved down to his grandmother's house. Mrs. Sims went with him, though Jenny knew it was hard for her to leave the baby. But she was content to mother and look after Fowler, to live more quietly. Jenny arranged for some one to do the heavy work, the laundry and cleaning. She was very fond of this old lady.

The change, Jenny felt, was a relief to all of them. More especially, to Dunny, who became more natural and talkative, affectionate and playful with Susan again, as he had not been for months. He went east for a short trip and came back much refreshed. Jenny

never said anything to him of what Fowler had told her. But she began the old familiar game of watching the pennies. She told Dunny that she did not need so much money for the house. Since Mrs. Sims was gone, she managed less expensively.

"I'm afraid you are overdoing. You are so thin, Jenny."

"It is fashionable," she told him, "and I am used to work. It makes me strong. I like to take care of the baby, and it is better for Susan to feel that I depend on her, than for her to play tennis with her friends all the time. I don't want her in the swimming pool the whole of next summer if I can help it."

The baby grew very darling, as spring came on. He was sitting up now, a wabby heap, with an engaging toothless smile. He loved Dunny better than any one and crowed with delight when he came in. Dunny spent a great deal of his time with the baby. They were fast friends. Susan was often with them. Jenny felt that Susan was fonder of Dunny and the baby than she had ever been of Merle and her older brothers. She was a tall young girl now, with soft, golden brown hair, and wide, dark blue eyes. Her friendly, engaging, small-girl ways were very attractive. Jenny clung to her with devotion. She felt the responsibility for this one daughter keenly.

In June Dunny suggested that it would be a good thing for all of them to take a real vacation. He had let some cases go. He had things in shape at the office, no serious cases in the summer term of court. And he could do some work while they were gone. If she thought she could leave the boys, they could take Susan and Nellie with them, and go to California, or to the state

of Washington, to Spokane or Seattle. He had always wanted to go there. Perhaps they would spend part of the summer in British Columbia. They would stay until September, have a real change, and spend a great deal of time out-of-doors.

Jenny fell in with his plans eagerly, though it would not be easy to take a small baby. She and Susan shopped for new clothes. Susan had her own trunk now. Nellie, too, had to be outfitted for the journey and equipped with baggage. The house was to be closed. Merle wrote to them that he had a job as an assistant in the summer naval school. He could earn something toward his college education, and keep an eye on Tom who would stay with him, in camp.

They went to Merle's Commencement, all of them but Fowler. Susan danced all night long, in the arms of innumerable cadets. She was too young, Jenny insisted, but Merle and Tom promised to take good care of her. The girls were all going to dances young, Jenny was informed. After all, at a preparatory school, they were all children. And Susan was pretty in a pale green frock and green slippers—a gift from Dunny.

Jenny and Dunny stood in the sun with other smiling middle-aged people and watched the endless maneuvers, the endless marching, the boys in their formal suits, their young necks rigidly encased in stiff collars, their young heads burdened with the high heavy hats, their faces red and proud and perspiring. Tom and Merle belonged in this masculine world. It fitted them. And Susan was having a marvelous time. Tom would be here three years. She would go to many hops, have the girlhood Jenny had wanted.

They were all growing and developing splendidly.

Jenny was proud of Merle. If his father could have seen him! And she was proud of Dunny, of the respect with which he was greeted by every one. The state seemed to come up behind her, a solid wall of reinforcements, of connections, of strength and honor. It had been a long way, from the girl in her mother's ill-kept house, but every step had seemed natural.

They were home just two days before they left for the trip. Fowler came to see them. He had not seemed to mind being left behind.

"I'll stick at my job, Muth. I'm getting pretty good on the machine. And I'm writing a play, at night. Mrs. Sims is fine to me. I'll be all right."

Jenny kissed him.

"You'll keep in touch with Miss Caruthers, won't you? You'll go to see her sometimes?"

"I'll go to see her a couple of times a week. She wants me to read my play to her, as I write it. She's intelligent, isn't she, Muth? And I'll write to you. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll set up my letters on the linotype and pull proofs of them. How would you like that?"

"That would be wonderful!" And so it was arranged. He had, she saw, no real comprehension of the disaster in which he had been involved, or the pain and the sacrifice he had required of them. And she had sought to separate him from Marian Caruthers' influence! He had been too young, too precocious, too self-confident to be sent away to school.

But Jenny girded her strength about her. She must put these thoughts all behind her, let Fowler go his own way freely, and make her happiness without him. She had Dunny and the new baby and Susan. Merle and his boys were gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

DUNNY STRICKEN

SUSAN was eighteen. It was in the Christmas holidays, and the big house was full to overflowing with young people. There was a dance for Susan, and an orchestra had been brought from Stone City for the dancers. Jenny stood on the stairs and looked down across the wide old parlor, where the rugs had been removed, the floors freshly waxed. They were dancing in the library too, and in the second parlor. There was a buffet in the dining-room. There were, she feared, some drinks going around, from flasks, but Merle and Tom had promised to control it. When Jenny was a girl, and the county dry by local option, any boy that came to a dance with the odor of whisky about him, was promptly removed and given a black eye by some indignant brother. Jenny had never danced with a boy who had been drinking. In her day girls considered it their duty to reform the frequent young man who was known to drink whisky. She smiled to recall such innocence.

She rested her hand on Durham's shoulder. She had allowed him to stay up a little while, to watch the fun. He stood beside her, straight and tall for his six years, his light, clear brown eyes shining with excitement, watching the life and movement below, watching Merle and the pretty girl from Stone City. Merle was running the *Hilltown Journal*. On his graduation Jenny had given him outright her interest in it, and he seemed to have a gift for management. Tom was finishing his three-year pre-law course. He was an earnest convincing talker. He would be a good lawyer, Dunny thought.

Even Fowler, slim, odd, shy, was at the dance to-night, and Jenny, watching, saw that James Lattimer was with Fowler and Susan more than she liked. She had noticed his tendency to rush Susan for a year or more.

Lattimer was older than any one else at the party. He was nearing thirty. He was a lawyer connected with the diplomatic service in Washington. He was an extraordinarily handsome man, home this Christmas to visit his parents, who were old and frail. Jenny thought him more like Molly all the time, although he seemed a young man of the finest honor, loved and respected by every one. How strange, that no one but herself knew that James Lattimer was Molly's child! She felt that at last she had come to the heart of Molly's restraint when she had wanted this boy, had twisted and turned and struck to get him, and then gone quietly off out west, alone. Perhaps Molly had foreseen something like this, her boy, dancing at the Kents', in a place prepared for him by his father's connections, at home with the nicest young people to be found in the state, eligible for any marriage—all that as against the boy alone with her. Perhaps she had learned that she had not long to live and did not want to take this chance from him for a few months with herself.

All very well, but he could not have Susan! She was too young and sweet for him. She was Jenny's ewe lamb, and Jenny could protect her! Just how, she did not know, but now, with everything so orderly and calm in their lives, save that Dunny was not well, she had no intention of letting things get away from her.

Fowler, she saw, was fascinating the girls. He had written a thin clever book which had been published in the East and then made into a play. He was planning

to go to Europe in the spring. It was agreed between himself and Susan that he would buy her house before he went. He was twenty-one now, and he had come into his money, which Molly had left him, and out of the shadow of the juvenile court. He seemed very steady. But to Jenny he lacked the reality, the force and manhood of his father and Dunny, that masculinity which was manifesting itself now in Merle and Tom. Fowler was superficial. His cleverness left her cold. He was entirely egotistical and selfish. The things he wrote were smart and biting, introspective and morbid, not deeply and beautifully true. He had worked on the linotype machine at the *Journal* for six years, without missing more than a day or so. He had paid, Jenny told herself, for those three wild and ungovernable years she had had with him. But in reality he had paid for nothing. The mechanical activity of the typesetting job had suited his temperament strangely. His armor of self-esteem was practically impervious. He had been frightened once or twice, never pierced with realization. And yet, oddly, without his knowing it, his instinct for self-protection, for turning away the shafts meant for his good, had reduced him to a moral beggary of which he was unaware. It was his sublime egotism that attracted the girls. But to Jenny he was baffling and disappointing. She saw that the resemblance between him and herself had long ago fallen away. For though she had been wilful, she had never been able to hide away from her punishments, but had rather bared her breast to receive them.

Durham's voice broke in on her slow thoughts.

"Isn't Merle's girl pretty, Mother? He always has such pretty ones!"

"She is lovely, dear. Would you like her for your sister?"

"Is Merle going to marry her, Mother?"

"It's hard to tell. When I was a girl that is what it would have meant."

Durham laughed. He looked up at her. He was very like Dunny, but he seemed more joyous.

"The boys think you are old-fashioned, Mother."

She smiled and pinched his cheek. There was a great deal of gray in her hair now. Her step on the stairs was not so springy as it had been. She went into Durham's room, the old nursery, and stayed with him until he was in bed, and then she put out his light and went on into her own room, and so into the sitting-room beyond it. Dunny was in there now, lying back in a deep chair, near the fire, smoking. He smiled up at her. He was very thin. She touched his hair.

"How are you?"

"I'm feeling much better," he said. It was his invariable answer. Like Joseph Vance's mother, he was better every day, worse every week.

"I hope so, Dunny. You've had to be at home so much this winter. I know it is tiresome for you. They are having such a good time down-stairs, all of them."

"Aren't they! I think it is going to be a match, don't you?"

"Merle, you mean?"

"No—Merle's not in love. I mean Susan and James."

"But I don't like that, Dunny. I don't like James—for Susan."

"Not like James? But he's the finest boy in town. He's going to have a career, that young chap is. And he loves Susan. He has already broached the subject to

me. After all, we should be glad it's a town boy, and not some youngster we never saw before."

"Dunny, he's Molly's son. He can't have Susan."

Dunny looked at her.

"You aren't out of your head, are you, Jenny?" he said wonderingly. "I was Molly's lawyer. I knew all of her affairs."

"Evidently you didn't." She sat down beside him and told him all about Molly Clarke and Merle, about Mrs. Lattimer and Molly's desire to get her son again.

"Merle must have told her," he said slowly. "He met her there in my office, at that time. I remember he told me he was afraid to see her elsewhere. They talked a long time, and I waited on Merle to go out with him. He must have made a bargain with her, then, that he would tell her, if she would do nothing about it. Of course he did! He couldn't have taken a risk like that for you."

Jenny felt sick with disappointment.

"But she didn't do anything about it—if she knew!"

"By that time she had been to the doctor. She knew she was dying. So that explains her will! She told me she had always wanted a son. She was very careful about the four boys she chose. They all have their money, now, but Bowen's boy. This is extraordinary, Jenny. Why didn't you tell me this before! Why, he even looks like the judge!"

"Ah, but he looks like Molly more."

He was silent, thinking, and he said at last.

"Doctor Lunt was not so unscrupulous as you think him. I remember some old town history—I've heard my mother talk about it. It was one reason I was punished for running off from Molly—you recall the croquet

game, don't you, Jenny? Molly's mother was a Lattimer—a cousin of the judge. She married that good-for-nothing Winnet, and her father never had anything more to do with her. When she died, they offered to take Molly back—she was a baby, but Winnet cursed them off his premises. James is a Lattimer, after all. And a fine boy, Jenny. You wouldn't—you couldn't tell him—now!"

"Oh, no—but do you feel the same toward him?"

"I believe I do!"

But Jenny shook her head.

"Not for Susan," she said. "I can't have that, Dunny."

"I suppose not. Well, life is a strange thing—the good and bad get so terribly mixed up. I believe in James. He is healthy in mind and body. He has a fine future before him. Susan could be happy with him. She is very much in love."

"She is only a baby," said Jenny.

But Dunny shook his head.

"No," he said, "you are mistaken. She is not a baby at all. The world is a forcing house, since the war. Susan, at eighteen, is as wise as to her own wishes as you were—at nineteen. She's a young woman, and a strong one. You will not find it easy to turn her aside if she is in love with him. She's been dancing and playing with boys for a long time. He's old enough really to interest her."

Jenny let it go without further comment. She had made up her mind. She moved about the room, putting it in order.

Dunny said: "Things are bad down-town, Jenny. They say the mill is to be closed."

"They are trying to sell it."

"They can't sell it now. Merle is going to have a hard time with the *Journal* the next few years. It always seemed so funny to me that it wasn't Fowler who took hold down there. He never learned or did a thing beyond his job."

"He ran the machine with his fingers. His mind was on other things."

Dunny coughed a little carefully, and his face grew white. Jenny watched him anxiously.

"Dunny," she said softly, "I've wanted to ask you a question for a great many years. Will you answer it now?"

"Perhaps," he said, "unless you wanted to know whether I still love you?" He smiled at her whimsically.

"Dunny, how much did it cost you—that time—to get Fowler off? How much of a bribe—did you give?"

"So Fowler told you? I might have known he would. It's far enough away to talk about—and you may as well know now since it's something you're bound to know in time. It took everything I had, Jenny. Not only my money. . . . I was afraid, for a year or so, that we'd be found out, and I'd be disbarred. Every day I expected a summons. Every time the sheriff came into my office, I thought he had come for me. I've felt safer, these last years—but I've never been as convincing in court. I'm sorry you had to know—yet it's good to talk to you, Jenny."

"Everything you had! Do you mean that literally?"

"Yes," he said, "and it was a scandal that we could do it even at the price we paid. You see—the school was in a small town. There was a deputy prosecutor, a state prosecuting attorney—a magistrate. We couldn't

get Fowler off, without getting them all. I sold the farm to make up the amount I had promised. I've never saved or accumulated much, since then. We've spent the earnings of the firm, pretty steadily. I've been able to keep up my work. Oh, there will be some left for you, Jenny. It's always been a great comfort to me that you never touched what Merle left you. And I've deeded this house to you."

"Fowler shall give it back to you—every penny he has—and the rest—whatever it is——"

"I don't want Molly's money. I——"

"Yet you are willing for Susan to marry her son!"

"Susan is in love with James, now."

"She will have to get over it," said Jenny sternly.

Dunny smiled at her slowly. "Why didn't you tell me this years ago, Jenny?"

"I thought that if Molly wanted you to know, she would have told you. I wouldn't have told it, now, except for Susan."

"I understand how you feel—if you are not too late."

"Two things are going to happen in this family at once. One of them is that it will be Susan who goes to Europe, and Fowler will pay you back every cent that he has, and pledge what he can earn to make up the balance. I have been waiting for him to offer to do it since he came of age, but I will not be shy in asking him now."

Dunny was silent a long time. Jenny felt curiously balked.

"Fowler can never repay me," he said. "I don't want it paid."

He coughed again, and she said, in a deeply anxious tone:

“What is it that hurts you so, Dunny?” It was what she had said to Fowler—that he could never repay it!

“Jenny, come here, and sit close to me. Give me your hand, Jenny. That’s better. How smooth and young your hands are. They are like your mother’s. She had such splendid hands. Do you remember? I’ve something to tell you—bad news again, Jenny. I’m your dark angel, it seems. I’ve been trying to nerve myself to speak about it—— This seems as good a time as any, since we are talking so seriously. I’m afraid I’m going to leave you alone again, Jenny, and I don’t want you to grieve for me. I want you always to think of how happy you have made me—always to remember that our marriage was the one great satisfaction of my life.”

“Dunny! You are always obscure. Tell me directly what you mean.”

“I thought perhaps I could put it off until spring—telling you. I’ve been bluffing for weeks, now. It’s this stomach of mine, Jenny. In a few months—spring at the latest—Doctor Lockerbie says. It’s malignant, Jenny.”

The music came welling up the stairs, and faintly, through the closed door, into their room. She sat looking at Dunny. She could not say a word. She could not breathe or think. He went on quietly.

“I think perhaps it is better for you to know now, dear. I will try to be as brave as I can. There isn’t any chance of an operation. When the pains first started, in the fall, it seemed as though I knew at once, but I wouldn’t go to the doctor. I told myself it was the same old indigestion, maybe a little ulcerated condition. I began to drink milk, again. Remember? But the pains became so severe that many days I could not

work at all, but just sat there in the office. But I went, about six weeks ago, and had an examination. Sometimes I am almost comfortable, Jenny."

"And you did not tell me! But—you are mistaken. I am sure of it! You are so young, Dunny! You must get another opinion—you must go to a specialist. We will go to-morrow."

"I have been to three," he said. "You may be sure I have not taken the first M. D.'s word for it. It is cancer."

The room rocked and steadied. She could hear his voice faintly coming, like the music, from far away.

"One thing to ask of you, Jenny—that you be brave. We can be very happy these few months. I'll not go down-town any more. I can do a little work here. We must meet it with what philosophy we have. You have always been a wonderfully brave and understanding woman. I want you with me as much as you can arrange. Mrs. Sims can come back to run the house with Nellie. Later, when I grow worse, we'll have a nurse——"

The steady words, the calm cultivated voice were meaningless. Jenny's face was stiff and hard. It was the one thing he wanted—no scenes, no outcry—no tears or lamentations. He was asking her to rise to his own heights of human dignity, to accept the blow as he had accepted his defeats, without murmur or outcry.

Senselessly the music came beating up the stairs like ghoulish laughter. Jenny got up and moved about.

Dunny said, "We will not need to tell the children, Jenny."

A line from one of the poems Fowler loved to read came and went in her head:

“Death beating the door in——”

“I will do whatever you want me to do—and be whatever you want me to be, Dunny. You know—I don’t need to tell you—what it means.”

“I knew you would be—sensible. I know what it means—to both of us. When there is nothing to be done, Jenny, it is best of all to do nothing,” he said.

She could not answer him. There was the taste of dust and ashes in her mouth.

“Will you read to me, Jenny? I get so tired—the book is heavy. Here it is—this is the place. I told White I’d look up the law for him.”

She took the heavy tome. The fine print wavered. With a great, an unprecedented effort of her will she fixed it with her eyes, and half by instinct, in a muffled hollow voice, she began to read aloud from a tiresome work on contracts. He sat listening. Jenny read on steadily. But in fifteen minutes she felt that she was alone. He was asleep, lying there in his chair, as thin as a good sword, his finely carved face already drawn, his eyes, even when closed, marked with pain. His temples were hollow, as though pressed in by a thumb. He was not relaxed in his sleep she saw.

She stared at him as though she would engrave every line upon her heart for ever. He could bear anything! He was so strong. His endurance was greater, his soul more resourceful than that of any other. Her spirit knelt in respect before his. But ah, it was love that wounded her. Since that night so long ago when she had turned her face for his kiss, her heart had burned with love for him. No man that ever she knew was as good a man as Dunny, she thought sorrowfully, no man or woman as fine and wonderful. She was not good enough

for him. That was why God was taking him away from her, after seven short years. Seven years—and he was going—in the spring. She wished, with a despairing passion that the malignant thing within him was in her own vitals, that she could take and bear it in her body—that pain and agony, unto death, as she had borne her children to life; that he could be free, while she suffered it. But her body, though a little tired, a little less eager than before, was strong and sound and sweet with health. She was almost fifty, and she was still full of vigor.

Terror engulfed her. Her mother, and Merle, and Dunny—all of them so young—to die! It had been this business of Fowler's which had broken Dunny. He had never been the same, after that. Fear, indigestion, ulceration, cancer. Not a medical diagnosis, perhaps, but a true one. His conscience—his sense of betrayal to his profession, his loss of his own integrity in the courtroom—eating him—destroying him! And what, she asked herself, was Fowler, that Dunny should have wrecked himself for him! Her heart broke to think of Dunny, expecting a heavy hand upon his shoulder, expecting a leak, an investigation, a scandal—for a worthless boy—her boy, with bad blood in him! She saw with horror that she had not only permitted, she had demanded this sacrifice of his honor, his peace of mind, from Dunny. Her ordeal for Durham was fresh before him. He could deny her nothing. She had told him she would put him first, that she loved him better than any one, and at the first crisis she had been absolutely ruthless, for Merle's son. "Bring him back to me. . . ." She had made him say again and again, "I will bring him back." "No matter what you have to do—no matter—bring him back!"

She had boasted to her mother that she would pay the price, for Merle. But it was Dunny who had paid. She had required her accounting of him.

He was too good—too good—dear God, make it easy for him——

But she would do this last thing for him, since he had loved her! She would nurse him with her own hands. She would see that he had opiates, perfect care, that he never saw anything but a cheerful smile on her face, that he had comfort and companionship in every waking hour, and love to watch over him while he slept. She would put off her grieving until she was alone and could give way to it. Now she would live only for Dunny.

She did not think about Susan and James again until they came to her on New Year's Day and told her they were married. Susan had a bright new ring on her thin girl's hand. Jenny took the blow in full stride. Some thought of annulment came to her—and then the real bomb was thrown.

"We were married the day after the Christmas party, Mother. James and I drove to Stone City that afternoon. Remember—Father wasn't well, and the doctor was here all afternoon? I'd have told you when we got back, but you were with them, up-stairs. Then we thought it would be fun to keep it a secret until New Year's Day, and we did! But now—I want to go back to Washington with Jamie, Mother. Sweetheart—don't look so awful! Forgive me! I didn't want a wedding. I hate 'em—fuss and feathers! And James had spoken to Daddy. I'd have told you—only, I wasn't sure—till that day. But I wouldn't have done it—if I'd known you'd look so awful——"

"You've been married a week?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Kent. It wasn't the right way to do—I guess. It just—happened. As Susan says—we didn't either of us want a wedding. And we knew, Susan's father was ill—and you were worried about him. Tom knows. He was with us. He thought it was all right. But we are sorry that we didn't tell you when we got back. We want you to forgive us, now. Won't you?"

Jenny kissed her daughter. She was helpless in her resentment. "We must send announcements," she said in confusion. "I'll tell your father. He mustn't be startled."

"Mother—is Daddy so terribly ill?"

"Yes, but he will soon be better." She looked at Susan's fresh beautiful face. "God love you!" she said, her own eyes wet with tears—for everything.

James, tall and broad, stooped for her kiss and she pressed her lips against his cheek. Molly's son—and Susan!

Dunny took it quietly, but he looked at Jenny anxiously. "You aren't too disappointed? I was afraid of it. They seemed really in love to me. If you had told me years ago—Jenny."

"It is done," she said.

It was for this that she had won Susan from her detachment, for this that she had protected the boy from Molly—for this—that her grandchildren might be Molly's grandchildren. Only those who have lived in a little town and known the black shadow of a small-town prostitute can understand Jenny's horror. But she could not grieve now. This too would have to wait. Her will must sustain her, since it seemed no longer able to alter what needed altering.

She packed for the little bride who was to start life in a hotel in Washington, until she could get an apartment, start as casually, start as cheerfully as though it were another trip to school.

“Molly’s money,” thought Jenny over and over. “How have we come by Molly’s money?”

Her little Susan, her baby, her small daughter, whom she had loved and treasured so, had weaned from indifference, to whom she had given such exquisite care. The perfect teeth, the lustrous hair, the satin skin that Susan took for granted, and that her mother knew were the result of care—care—care!

It had been no way to do—to take as he liked! She supposed, bitterly, she should be grateful that he had behaved honorably! He seemed manly enough and promising. Possibly the marriage would be a success. It seemed as if the waters were closing in upon her, stifling her. She thought of Fowler and Susan, and how little she had known of them, wondered how much she knew of Tom and Merle—what lives they led. They would come strolling in some day with wives on their arms——

She was reading aloud to Dunny when the news came to them, from the evening paper, that the bank had been closed. Mr. Bowen was an old man now. He had not done well, these last few years. The defunct Hilltown Trust Company had been reorganized and opened again with a young manager, and had offered him brisk competition. Dunny sat up, as Jenny read it all out slowly. He was intensely interested.

He explained it all to her. He was no longer a stockholder, thank heaven! He had sold his stock at the time of Fowler’s catastrophe. They would not be involved

with the bank. It was the failure of the mill which had precipitated the crisis, and the land-holding company the bank had formed would go down with it.

"This is why I was opposed to your signing the repository bonds for Mr. Bowen," he said to her. "It is going to be a bad failure. The other bank was bad enough, five years ago. This will be worse. The Bowens will lose every cent they have, and so will the others who own stock or are on bonds. The stockholders are liable, you know, for twice the amount of their holdings, or twice the amount of the bond, in case of failure."

She opened her mouth and closed it again. She had never told Dunny that she had signed repository bonds—and renewed them!

"It will be hard," she asked casually, "for the bond signers? You mean that if I had signed that bond—that time—and listed my own bonds as security that I would have lost them?"

"Every one," he said. "The county and the townships will sue the bond signers, and the court will issue judgments against them. It may take months—a year or two even. But it will be inevitable. Everything listed will be in the hands of the receiver to-morrow."

"Dunny, that can't be right!"

"Of course it's right. The depositor comes first. Public moneys—a sacred trust, savings and trust funds—it has to come from somewhere. You understand banking as well as I do, Jenny."

"I suppose it will be hard for the town."

"For a time—for a few people. Call Mr. White, will you please, Jenny? We'll have to protect some of our clients—there are things to be done at once."

“I’ll call him. But not if you’re going to excite yourself, Dunny.”

She was at the door to meet Mr. White when he came. She had no intention that Dunny should learn from him, or any one, that there would be nothing left for her of her inheritance from Merle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

SOLITARY HARBOR

JENNY came out of the market one spring day several years after Dunny's death. The law-suits following the sensational bank failure had dragged out two full years. As she turned to go up the street toward the old Fowler house where she lived alone now she saw Marian Caruthers waiting on the corner for her.

"I thought I'd ask you about Fowler, Jenny. Have you had a letter from him lately?" She fell into step beside Jenny.

"He's splendid, Marian. He and his wife are going to spend the summer in Spain. In the mountains. That island they've been living on is too hot. Last year Fowler didn't mind. He was writing his play. But this year they aren't going to stay through the heat."

"Isn't it wonderful how successful his work is? Aren't you proud of him, Jenny? I'm going all the way to Chicago to see *The Bright Mask* when it comes there in the fall. I wouldn't miss it for anything."

"It's very popular," said Jenny. "And do you know that bothers Fowler. He loves to be exclusive—hard to understand. I'll confide in you, Marian, I didn't understand it. It's so modern, and so long. Psychological—about a son and his mother. There are seven acts. I got so sleepy I could scarcely hold my eyes open. Fowler's wife was terribly amused at me, though I don't know why."

"He's making money from it, isn't he?"

"Yes, but not so much as people think. But I'm glad, because he lost all that he got from Molly producing

his own first two plays. You've no idea how much it costs to produce a play, Marian—and when it fails! But he makes a nice living now, and he's very generous with me. Money never had any meaning to him, anyhow."

"That's his artistic temperament," said Marian complacently. "You know, Jenny, we were brought up to be so practical, and Hilltown people are overly careful of money, anyhow. I'm proud of Fowler. I feel as though I had my share in it."

"And you did!"

"How are the other children, Jenny?"

"They are all well now, thank you. Susan's baby seemed to be having a little trouble, but Susan says the baby specialist has started it with different food—sour milk. Can you think of it? She thinks he is gaining a little. When I think how casual Mrs. Sims and I were——" Jenny would not tell Marian about her fears for Susan and Susan's children, for Fowler and his English wife, for Merle's trade of the *Hilltown Journal* for an interest in a paper at the capital, for Tom's frail young wife. She was as full of fears as the spring evening was of shadows.

"They were all coming to see me this summer, but Susan doesn't want to move the baby away from the doctor she has. Now that Durham is there, going to school and living with her, she's not homesick as she was last year. She's making friends gradually. It was hard to let Durham go, but I didn't think it was good for him, living alone with an old woman like me, and Susan loves him so!"

"It must be very hard for you, to have them all away."

"Of course it's hard. But I'm so glad the boys are all settled now. It was my own folly that deprived them of their inheritance, but none of them seemed to mind. They all know how to make money."

"They get that from you, Jenny. You were always smart!"

"I hear you aren't going to teach after this term, Marian. Is that so?"

"Don't you think it's time for me to quit? I've taught over thirty years, in the same school. They're giving me a pension. And I've saved a little. I always appreciated the advice you gave me long ago—to invest my money. I'd have lost my savings in the bank failure if things had been different."

"What are you going to do?"

"I think I'll make the grand tour next summer. I've always wanted to go to Europe. I might see Fowler—he asked me to come to see him, if I got over there! And then, when I get back, I'm going to do some work. We need a new text-book for first year Latin. I had it in my mind to prepare one. I've talked to the publishers already."

"Why, that will be wonderful," said Jenny kindly.

"And what do you do all alone there?" said Marian.

"Oh, I keep house for myself—and write letters to the children—and read," said Jenny vaguely, as though she could not think what it was she did.

They stood so, in talk, on the corner where their paths parted toward the homes in which they had been born. Both of them were a little stooped, a little thin, old and lonely, with sloping shoulders and gentle sad mouths. And they seemed equally innocent and good in the fading light of the spring evening. It might have been

only a shadow, but it seemed to Jenny for a moment as if another figure—the thin illusion of Molly Winnet, in a cerise dress—moved near them with elaborate indifference.

Long and differing voyages, but the same solitary harbor in the end.

THE END

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